

1 **Yu Okano**
Illustrated by TAPIOCA

The
Exiled Noble
Rises
as the

HOLY KING



Befriending Fluffy Beasts
and a **Holy Maiden**
with **My Ultimate Cheat Skill!**

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“Woof!
(Milord! The finishing blow!)”

“Woof woof!
(Now’s your opportunity!)”

On cue, I took my opportunity to strike while the two hounds acted as a distraction. I swerved around behind it and cut off its head with my short sword. Blood spurted out, and the orc violently flailed its arms for a while. But gradually it grew weaker, until it finally fell flat on the ground with a heavy thud.

When she heard me, Aht's lips slowly curved up. I'd only seen her smile coldly or crazily before, but for the first time, I saw a pure smile on her face. Then, her huge eyes gradually welled up, and a single large tear streaked down.

"That alone is plenty. I will go to my death before you and stand defiantly before all of your enemies. Please watch me from behind in safety, Master Noah," she said.



Characters



Mataza



Noah



Aht



Cath



Liber

Goblin



Orc



Evil Ent



Kobold



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Chapter 1: Exile

“Noah Olipiage! You are hereby banished from this house!”

So bellowed the Duke of Oraculum—my father, Seto Olipiage.

I was his eldest son and the would-be successor to his title. And yet my father had just announced that I would be thrown out.

Objectively speaking, this was incredibly cruel. Nobles who had been banished from their homes in the kingdom of Oraculum had practically no means of survival. The noble families of this country were often granted powerful divine protection from the gods. These blessings came with a great deal of respect, but those expelled from their houses lost both their divine protection and elite status. I’d even heard stories of ex-nobles who were surrounded by assailants and beaten to death almost immediately upon exile. Though in most of these cases, either their people already despised them or there were some other factors at play.

Even ignoring the extreme cases, it was difficult to survive with so few options for getting a job or earning one’s crust. That’s why exile from one’s noble house was a very uncommon occurrence...but my father had spoken. The implications of this statement alone were self-evident.

“F-Father, I’ll die if you do that! Please reconsider! Give me a chance! What have I done to deserve this?!” I pleaded with him, desperate to somehow preserve myself. The chances of having my sentence retracted were slim. But even if there was no chance at all, I knew that I wouldn’t survive otherwise.

There’s nothing else that I can do, I thought.

Despite this, my father spoke. “In truth, I had high hopes for you. You are brilliant and have excelled in your studies since early childhood. That much cannot be denied.”

“Th-Then...”

“With that said, you already know my reasons. The Church of Astral has

declared you an apostate. I cannot permit you to remain in this house.”

“I...”

It was just like he’d said. The Church of Astral—the state religion—had recently branded me an apostate. Of course, I hadn’t done anything to deserve it.

The Church of Astral had been around since the founding of the Oraculum Kingdom. It was an organization which legitimized the king’s right to rule, but was also a fearsome group known to mercilessly persecute apostates. Wherever its armed forces—in particular, the Order of Paladins—marched through, not even the hardiest weeds would spring back up in their wake. House Olipiage may have been one of the leading noble families forming the very backbone of the country, but if it incurred the attention of these forces, it wouldn’t come out unscathed.

I was the root cause for putting the house in almost certain jeopardy. Let alone keeping me as heir, just letting me stay in this house was out of the question. I knew that much.

I knew, but even so, there was nothing I could do but plead with my father.

Ever since I was young, I’d studied lots of different subjects to prepare for when I became the next duke. That knowledge would definitely come in use if I were to go into town. But though I’d received a costly education, I was still an ordinary human. Father had commended me as brilliant, but my grades were largely average. If I’d been the greatest warrior of the century, maybe I’d still have been able to get along after being banished from home and chased away by the Church.

But I knew myself. I didn’t have any power remotely like that. That was why I wanted to stay, even if I had to cling and beg. Then, my father could reason with the Church one way or another. If it came down to it, I could accept being kept on a tight leash for the rest of my life as long as I could just remain here.

I tried to show him how pitiful I was, but to no avail. Anyone could tell from his demeanor that my father had no intention of showing mercy.

However...

“I will say that this is against my wishes. However, Noah... Putting myself aside, please think of your mother Lin and younger brother Zeld. If the Church treats the whole family as apostates and chases us out, I can’t protect us all. It may seem cruel, but if banishing you alone will resolve things...”

“Father... No, I must apologize. I acted selfishly.”

I’d understood that from the start. I’d just decided to whine a bit until he made himself absolutely clear.

Besides, this was a necessary argument. Now father wasn’t the bad guy. On the contrary: he was being kind to me, even. The same went for my mother and brother. It was good that they weren’t here, because they would definitely have taken my side. Father knew that well, so he’d probably had them shut up in their rooms.

I chose not to mention them. Doing that just wouldn’t feel fair. If I had asked them for support, father might have instead chosen to oppose the Church despite knowing it could cause the fall of our house. Both father and I understood this. In effect, this conversation was a mere formality with the outcome already decided. A pretense to let the chamberlain and maids bear witness to the foolish son whining for the impossible. So that the women would spread word that the foolish son had been completely cut off from the family.

My father’s kindness, and my final smidgen of respectable behavior, would turn this into a sympathetic tale that would be easier for people to believe.

At the end of our “performance,” father pronounced his verdict upon me once more. His voice sounded weary, but it was still powerful enough to be clearly heard by everyone in the room.

“Noah Olipiage... No, from this moment forth, you are simply Noah. Because there are...*discontented* citizens on the outside, I will show mercy to you and send you off somewhere safer. That will be the last time we shall meet. After that, you may venture anywhere you please. I will inform the Church of this as well.”

In other words, he wouldn’t know where I was once my exile truly began. He’d assert to the Church that the family had nothing to do with me. He’d show that much resistance, at least.

That was enough. The Church was just that fearsome.

So I nodded and gave him my only response. "I appreciate all that you've done for me up to this day."

* * *

"Stop it here!" came a shout from outside the coach.

The shout was from my...no, House Olipiage's escort of knights. I'd been banished from home a few days ago, and was presently being sent "far away" by coach. Even when I asked where I was being taken, nobody would give me an answer. When the Church came asking after me later, my father would probably want to say, "I told them to just dump him wherever, so I don't know." If he actually *had* given detailed instructions, it was still more prudent to not tell.

After all, the Church had plenty of mages and wielders of special skills to go around. There was no telling if someone out there could reconstruct the details of the conversation we'd had there in my father's office in the Olipiage house, even days after the fact. There were plausible whispers that people with those kinds of skills actually existed.

I'd tried to ask the soldiers about it, but they'd maintained silence toward me. That was disappointing, since we'd been able to have cordial conversations back when I was at home. But they had families of their own to consider, so they had to keep their jobs and stay loyal to the Olipiage family.

In other words, after they left me someplace, they had a duty to return to the house and deal with the Church's rigorous questioning. In those circumstances, we could expect the Church to use any of the means at its disposal. It was entirely conceivable that they might even have their minds read.

Are there really any special skill-wielders who can do that? I had my doubts...but the Church's track record made it seem like the only explanation.

For just one concrete example, a child of a prominent figure had supposedly been hidden somewhere where nobody would ever find them, but was rescued after interrogating just one man. A man who hadn't said a single word.

Exercising caution was about the only thing you could do.

While I contemplated this, the canopy of the coach rustled open and a familiar face peeked in. It was Bach Rogue, the captain of the Duke of Olipiage's knights who were escorting the coach. He had stern features and a serious look in his eyes. He was also the one who had taught me how to use a sword. Thanks to that, we'd had a pretty friendly relationship before, but...

"Noah. Get out," he curtly ordered me to exit the coach.

This was by no means the first time he'd taken a tone of authority with me, so it wasn't startling. During my swordsmanship lessons, he always spoke harshly and forcefully so I wouldn't be coddled. But otherwise, he never forgot his manners. Hearing him speak so sternly to me like this made it clear that my status really had drastically changed.

I thought I'd mostly come to terms with the fact, but having it thrust in my face so bluntly made me feel unexpectedly...sad? Or perhaps the right word was "empty."

My exile guaranteed the bare minimum of safety for my parents and brother. I was okay with being a necessary sacrifice for them. But I couldn't go back anymore. I couldn't return to the light or ever live a happy life again. My sentence had been pronounced.

Moreover, I was about to be ditched who-knows-where. It was almost like I was just being told to go die. Actually, that was pretty much the case.

I'm starting to really hate this.

Bach pulled me out. Once I was beyond the canopy, I found myself in a forest so dense that there was hardly a road through it anymore. The only tracks on the ground were the furrows left by the coach I'd been in and the horseshoe prints of the knights' steeds. Everywhere else was overgrown with unchecked, moss-covered tree roots. It wasn't a current road—it had probably been in use ages ago and then been abandoned a while back, while still being maintained by the wild animals and people with unsavory professions who passed through occasionally.

That was probably the story here, right?

They weren't really going to abandon me *here*, were they?

I'd naively hoped that they'd at least leave me at a village or something, but I never would've expected that they'd seriously bring me somewhere completely uninhabited.

To be fair, going to a populated area as an exiled noble meant running the risk of getting mobbed, but I'd heard that if I could just grit my teeth and work hard for a while, there was some chance that I could be accepted as one of the villagers. I'd placed my hopes on that possibility...but I'd been completely off the mark.

What am I supposed to do?

What's going to happen to me?

As these kinds of thoughts raced through my mind, Bach explained things. "This is the western region of the kingdom. Strictly speaking, this area isn't incorporated into the Oraculum Kingdom. It's a place commonly known as the Purgatory Forest. Noah, you've heard of it before, haven't you?"

"P-Purgatory Forest?! Are you serious?! If you leave me here, I really *will* die!"

The words "Purgatory Forest" shook me to the core. When I saw that they had brought me to an uninhabited forest, I'd expected it'd be some small grove in a sparsely populated region, far away from the urban areas. But this was infamous for being monster territory.

Sure enough, monster territories had no people around, were located beyond the kingdom's lands, and were definitely remote. That wasn't the issue here, though. What was extremely problematic for me was that these were places where powerful monsters dwelled, determined over a long period of time to be unfit for human residence. Anyone who could survive after being abandoned in such a place would have to be a warrior or mage with an inhuman level of strength.

And you're leaving me here?! Give me a break, seriously! I clung to Bach and his knights, who had merrily begun preparations to return home already. "W-Wait, please! Can't you just drop me off a little closer to civilization? In this place, there's no way I can—"

Despite my pleading, Bach callously peeled me off. "Noah. This is an order

from the master. It cannot be disobeyed. Give it up,” he replied gravely. He didn’t tear me away roughly, but rather with the tough love of a teacher admonishing his rebellious student. It gave me a little bit of comfort, but this was still a death sentence, so it was no real help whatsoever.

Bach continued. “I’m leaving you with a few days’ worth of rations and a short sword. This is a parting gift from the master and myself. I’m not supposed to say this, but... Noah? Don’t give in. Survive. I won’t say this is goodbye forever. Farewell.”

With those final words, he took the lead of the coach and went off into the distance.

I stayed there for a while, at a loss.

“Don’t give in”? Even if I choose to not give up in this situation, I’ll still die within a few days anyway, won’t I?

Doubts swirled around nonstop inside my head.

* * *

I’ll just have to die. There’s nothing else I can do.

Those were the only thoughts that came to mind. But even so...

“I’m not ready enough for death that I can abandon all hope yet.”

Abandoned somewhere within the monster territory known as the Purgatory Forest, and at a loss for what to do, I suddenly came back to my senses and murmured to myself. Saying something like this in the middle of the woods seemed like a bad idea, lest I tempt fate and give away my location to a keen-eared monster, but it didn’t feel like my sanity would last unless I could express these things out loud.

After all, I’ve just been left to fend for myself in a place with monsters so dangerous that even the army has given up on it.

I can’t see it any other way than being told to just die. But I don’t want to die. So what am I gonna do? I’ve gotta survive somehow...

I guess I should check what I’ve got with me first.

Come to think of it, I'd been told that they'd left me with rations. True enough, in the empty spot where the carriage had been now sat a cloth bag, about half my size.

A bag half as big as a fourteen-year-old boy wasn't all that large, but probably enough to hold a few days' worth of food. Checking the contents, I found...

"Jerky, salt, bread...not much in the way of vegetables or fruits, looks like. Oh, there's an apple here. But just one... Well, it won't keep long, so I guess this is it. The rest is mostly preserved foods. There's not much water. Am I supposed to go out and find some myself? In *this* forest? You've got to be kidding."

Water was going to be my lifeline. It was a bigger priority than other foods, but I hadn't been given much of it. If I didn't find a source of water today or tomorrow, I'd be done for. That was just how little there was.

As for food, I'd been told it was a few days' worth. If I had some water to go with it, though, I could last for a week. Preserved food really was an incredible innovation.

There was a moderately large rock of salt included, so if I hunted my own food, I could survive for a while without getting tired of the taste. But would I really be able to hunt for myself? I'd hunted rabbits and the like in human-managed forests before, but I didn't really have any experience beyond that, nor was I used to fighting monsters. I'd learned enough swordplay to put up a decent fight against another person, but I wasn't nearly skilled enough to qualify as self-reliant.

That made me remember something. "Right, my card... Oh, here it is."

I patted my clothes and found it in the right pocket of my hemp trousers. It had been snatched away from me at one point while I was getting thrown out, so I'd been afraid that I'd never get it back. But as I'd hoped, my father hadn't gone that far. Then again, this card had already been attuned to me, so there'd be no point in anyone else keeping it. It'd only be good as scrap material. Although, it was still worth a fair amount, and could probably fetch an especially tidy sum as it had come from a duke's household.

This item, commonly known as a "status card," was made out of a silvery material called mythrill. It was a consolidation of advanced magical technology.

By simulating a link to the <Akashic Records>—the Divine Intellect—it could display various details that someone might not know about themselves...or something like that. It had been explained to me at length before, but I honestly didn't understand the finer details. Actually, I don't think the mage who'd explained it to me in the first place understood it that well either. It was based on ancient technology which had been repurposed for use in a limited function. As there wasn't a lot of analytical study on it, it was entirely possible that the mage's explanation was largely incorrect.

Either way, I didn't give it too much thought. Regardless of how exactly it worked, I'd looked for my status card because it would give me important information that I sorely needed right now.

I channeled mana into the status card, which began to faintly display text.

Name: Noah

Species: Normal Folk <Human>

Titles: Former Noble of Duke Olipiage's House, Apostate of Astralism, He Who Bears a Mission

Root Skills: <Holy King>

Derived Skills: None

General Skills: <Swordplay 3>, <Wind Magic 2>, <Fire Magic 2>...

"Not much different—Wait, what's this? 'He Who Bears a Mission'? That wasn't there before my baptism..."

I tried tapping on that title to learn more about it. The card had a function where if an entry was pressed, it would display text describing it to some degree. According to what someone else had told me, this was also thanks to the Akashic Records. I didn't place much stock in that, since I had my doubts about whether such a generous entity existed in the first place.

Then who was responsible? Honestly, I wasn't sure. But it *was* ancient

technology. *Anything goes, right?* That was my reasoning.

Sadly, no matter how many times I pressed that strange title, there was no response. I'd heard this kind of thing could happen when no further explanation was possible. It was more common with titles, presumably because the gods had no interest in such decorations given among common people.

Then please don't be interested in my "Apostate of Astralism" title, I hoped with all my heart. But when I sighed and pressed it, it said:

Apostate: One who has disobeyed the teachings of Astralism. In Noah's case, he became one as a result of possessing the <Holy King> ability.

But it was true that everything had started when I gained the root skill <Holy King> at the baptism. That was why things had progressed to the point where I'd been abandoned in this place.

"There's not much I can do about it now, I guess. I should go look for a source of water first. *Then* I can sit down and think about things," I said to myself, then set off into the forest in the direction where I'd caught the scent of water.

* * *

"I'm saved! At least I won't die of dehydration." I sighed in relief. I'd just discovered a spring, small though it was. It'd have been nice to find a big lake instead, but I'd have to be on high alert for monsters coming to drink at a place like that. I was better off with a spring of this size.

I could see around the whole body of water with just a quick look. It was plain to see that there weren't any animals here besides myself. Once I'd made sure of that, I carefully checked the murkiness of the water and whether there were any animal remains in the spring. Then, I took the metal vessel which had been left by my family's guards and dipped it in, using it as a ladle. I gathered stones that were lying around and made a rudimentary stand, under which I laid out suitably dry wood which I'd picked up on my way here. Then I chanted a spell.

"Spirits of fire, answer my prayer and bestow a spark here. <Petit Fire>."

I felt as if something escaped my body, and sensed a convergence of energy in the center of the wood stacked under the water-laden vessel. It was an accumulation of mana. In answer to my prayer, the mana materialized into a small flame with a *fwoosh*. This was fire magic.

My ineptitude as a mage was evident from the “2” value for the <Fire Magic> general skill listed on my card. But even at 2, I could still do the most basic of spells, which would be exceedingly useful in this survival situation. Being able to ignite fires, albeit small ones, significantly improved my chances of avoiding wild animals and monsters. Of course, some monsters didn’t fear it, but it was common knowledge that most animals and monsters were instinctively afraid of fire. That was how we humans had secured places to live in a world where monsters were far stronger than us.

Fire was power.

Though, honestly, water magic would’ve been a lot more convenient for me...but I hadn’t learned any. Magic required compatibility, and I only had the aptitude for the elements of fire and wind. That wasn’t too bad in comparison to the general population, but in noble circles, it would be considered unremarkable. Anyone with *real* talent would be compatible with all four basic elements: fire, water, wind, and earth.

Even then, only the top students of the magic academy actually had that. The average noble child had about the same capabilities as me. I simply hadn’t inherited my father’s command over all four basic elements as my younger brother Zeld had. Even with me in exile, the house would be secure if he inherited it. I’d hoped to inherit the house myself, but there was no way that was happening now, no matter how much I bent over backward for it.

That’s enough thinking about that. Anyway, water comes first.

I figured it would be much better to boil water before drinking it, so I waited a while for the fire to do its work. “It should probably be fine by now,” I supposed, extinguishing the flame.

I covered the handle of the metal vessel with a thick cloth so that I wouldn’t get burned, then carried it over to a nearby table I’d cobbled together in my surplus of spare time. *It needs some time to cool. I can’t drink it when it’s boiling*

hot, after all. Well, it shouldn't take that long.

As I was thinking this to myself—

“Gugyagyah!”

“Kekehh!”

“Kakah!”

—I heard strangely gleeful cries.

They didn't sound very close, but I could still hear them clearly, so I had to take caution. If I didn't go check, that might very well give them an opportunity to sneak up behind me and attack while I was unaware. I reluctantly left behind the cloth bag I'd lugged along and quietly crept toward the voices, with the short sword I'd been given out of pity in hand.

The Purgatory Forest was inhabited by monsters, but not *all* of them were dangerous. It went without saying that regular monsters lived there too. Similarly to how bugs are practically everywhere in the world except for bitterly cold climates, even places like this had a wide variety of creatures that resided closer to the bottom of the food chain. At least, that's what I'd read in a book once.

I don't know how much of that is true, but I'll just have to trust it.

My knowledge was limited, but as far as what I did know, the identities of the monsters I'd heard screeching must have been... *I thought as much.*

As I hid among the shrubs and thickets, I came upon the monsters.

They had lumpy green skin, pointy witchlike noses, and stood about as tall as a human child. They were holding what I assumed to be clubs, wearing what looked to be worn-out loincloths. Simply put, these monsters were...

“Goblins. Those things really are everywhere. Hm?”

At their feet was something that concerned me far more. I could tell from their voices that they were reveling, but I couldn't tell why just by listening. Once I got close, though, I discovered the reason.

There were three goblins in all, but there was something else squirming at

their feet. The goblins were entertaining themselves by kicking it around.

They were *toying* with an animal.

They were wicked enough to take joy in mistreating others.

I became strangely furious, maybe because I could empathize with a small, helpless creature being toyed around with by other people, its life now turned into a nightmare. Foolish though it may have been, I found myself standing upright with short sword in hand.

“Whoooooa!!!” I gave a shout and rushed at them.

* * *

It was an extremely dismal fight. Scratch that, it barely even qualified as a fight.

Despite everything, I *had* been instructed by Bach in swordplay, and had the skills to show for it. Specifically, I’d learned enough to achieve <Swordplay 3> listed under general skills. How good was this, you may ask? Well...only slightly better than a rank amateur.

In the first place, the Swordplay skill included multiple advanced techniques. Even if you reached the highest rank of 10 in the normal category, it didn’t guarantee that you could vanquish any monster.

Nonetheless, a mastery of 10 was a significant accomplishment...but as I’d shown no indication of getting anywhere near that level, you can probably guess how proficient I was. That being said, I wasn’t a flimsy excuse for a fighter either. I had reason to believe that I could take on a measly goblin. Bach had even complimented me on being tolerably good in spite of my lack of real combat experience.

But reality was cruel.

My breath became ragged when I swung the short sword. As the goblins in front of me approached threateningly with their clubs, I was struck with greater fear than I’d ever felt before. Fighting mock battles with wooden swords in safe surroundings was meant to have acclimated me to that kind of fright. Yet to actually come face-to-face with something that wanted me dead was a whole

new level of terror.



Even so, I knew that if I didn't fight tooth and nail here, I wouldn't live to see tomorrow. So I fought like my life depended on it.

I fought dismally. I was dragged through the muck and beaten with clubs. Tree branches cut my skin and rocks scraped my knees. I was in pain from head to toe. But I was fully aware that if I stopped moving for even a moment, the monsters would kill me without mercy.

How long did I fight for? I lost my sense of time passing. The goblins' attacks finally stopped once I was at the point where I couldn't even tell if I was breathing.

The reason why was clear enough. As I panted for air, at my feet lay the three goblins, now nothing but silent corpses.

I'd killed the monsters.

This was a first for me.

I wasn't completely new to killing creatures. Bach had ordered me to help butcher livestock before, to get me accustomed to dismemberment. I don't think many sons of nobility were made to do that kind of work, but Bach apparently used to be an adventurer, so he was more strict about these kinds of things. That experience certainly must have paid off, because even though I'd just killed living beings by my own hands, I hardly felt any shock. The fact of the matter was that the goblins were dead, plain and simple, and the immediate danger had vanished. That gave me relief.

"Wait, that's not the only thing. Is it still alive?" Once I'd realized that the battle was over, I finally came back to my senses and remembered why I'd decided to pick a fight with the goblins. It was because the goblins had been inflicting harm on what looked to be a small animal. It was still lying there on its side. I rushed over to it and checked to see if it was still alive.

"Is it breathing? Yeah. It doesn't look too badly injured, actually. No broken bones either." When I placed my hand to its mouth, I definitely felt the flow of air. I ran my fingers along the small body's front and hind legs to be sure, but it didn't feel like anything was broken. Of course, I wasn't a doctor, so there was no guarantee my diagnosis was correct. For the moment, though, it didn't seem

to be in critical condition.

“That’s good...but I shouldn’t just leave it here. Besides, I should probably get away from these dead bodies. But first, I’ll take whatever materials I can get. No telling what there’ll be,” I said to myself. There was no real need for me to say it out loud, but I hoped it would help maintain my sanity. I certainly would’ve hushed up if there were any monsters around.

I mentioned “materials” because monster carcasses, including those of goblins, were valued for being used to make weapons and magic tools. That said, there was only one common material that goblins and their ilk were good for. Using my short sword, I carved close to the goblins’ hearts. When I did, a small pebble-like object came loose.

“It’s a mana stone. So they really do have them. I never would’ve imagined that I’d be vanquishing my first monsters right after getting exiled from home, but I’m actually feeling pretty thrilled about it. Maybe I can survive this after all?” I tried to encourage myself, but I understood perfectly well that reality was harsh. Killing a mere three goblins wouldn’t guarantee my survival in the Purgatory Forest. Still, coming out of that fight the victor was definitely preferable to the alternative.

That’s enough pessimism. I’ll start by doing what I can.

“I’ve got their mana stones, so for now I’ll go back to base camp where the spring is. I should probably move from that spot soon too. Oh, and I better take this little guy along.” I gently picked up the animal, still lying unconscious, in my arms.

It was an adorable creature. Why it was in this forest, I didn’t know, but...it was a kitten. Unmistakably a kitten.

“Both you and I are out of place in this nasty forest. Let’s both try our best to survive, okay?” It shouldn’t have been able to hear me anyway, but I thought out loud to the kitten as I headed back to my camp.

Chapter 2: Dependent

I first caught a humid scent close to my nose.

Then something warm rubbed against my cheeks.

The scratchy feel and the accompanying animal smell was unpleasant at first, but once I opened my eyes and saw the source of these sensations, I was relieved.

“You’re awake?” I asked, petting its head.

The kitten responded with a cute little meow.

After killing the goblins, I’d taken the kitten back with me to my camp at the spring. However, I’d left the carcasses where they were, which wasn’t all that far away. Powerful monsters could very well be drawn near by the scent of goblin blood. I hadn’t had the nerve to stay any longer at the spring while that was a possibility. I hadn’t given up on living yet.

Though I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t come to accept it somewhat. If I ended up dying in the worst-case scenario, that’d just be the end of it. If things came to that, I wouldn’t be bothering anyone anymore.

If my parents and little brother got word of my death—if that were even possible—they’d probably grieve for me. But as for whether they’d be *troubled* by it...they probably wouldn’t be. On the contrary, it would make things easier for them, as they wouldn’t need to make excuses to the Church anymore.

If I really have their best interests at heart, I should just kill myself here and now so that I’m very demonstrably dead.

But obviously I didn’t have that kind of resolve. Besides, it seemed safe to say my family loved me enough that they wouldn’t want that for me. Even my combat teacher Bach hadn’t seemed like he wanted me to die. We had been family, after all.

Well, that was good enough reason for me to try my best to survive. And so I

had packed up and moved my base to a different location.

That was another difficult venture, but I'd had strangely good luck. I had walked through the forest for a little before coming to a rock wall. When I followed along the wall, I discovered a cave big enough to enter.

Of course, I was aware that these kinds of spots were often already home to wild animals. I took a good look inside to see if there were any dangerous creatures. I checked for smells, shed fur, bones from prey animals—but the place didn't seem to be in use by anything else. I decided that this would be my new home in the Purgatory Forest.

However, there was no furniture to make this a proper home, so sleeping would obviously be a challenge. I gathered dry leaves to form a makeshift bed, then recreated the rudimentary stone stove that I'd begrudgingly left behind at the spring.

The kitten hadn't opened its eyes, but it was definitely still breathing. It had looked as if it was just unconscious. I was worried about it, but the most I could do was check up on it every so often. It'd have been a different story if I could use healing magic, but I didn't have the gift for that either. So all I could really do was stroke it softly.

As I did, my exhaustion caught up with me. Before I knew it, I had fallen sound asleep.

Then, just now, the kitten had woken up and licked me awake.

While I hadn't detected anything significant externally, I'd suspected that it might have been seriously injured after what it had gone through. But there didn't seem to be anything wrong with it based on how it was behaving. It playfully batted my fingers when I held them out, and it seemed to enjoy rolling around on my lap. It definitely *acted* like a cat...but something didn't feel right.

"You're a cat, right? There are plenty of you in cities, and wildcats aren't unheard of in peaceful forests, but this is the Purgatory Forest," I said.

The kitten only tilted its head and gave an inquisitive meow in response.

Well, go figure. It is a cat.

But I would soon understand that I was greatly mistaken.

Something slithered inside the cave. It was a snake, creeping along.

“Yeek!” I unthinkingly shrieked like a little girl when I noticed the big serpent. But just then...

Shoop!

The snake was instantly sliced in two.

“Huh?” I was caught in a daze.

Meanwhile, the kitten approached the sliced snake and batted at it with its forepaws. It picked up one half in its mouth and carried it over to me.

“Oh, you’re giving it to me? Er...I’m okay, thanks,” I said with an uneasy look.

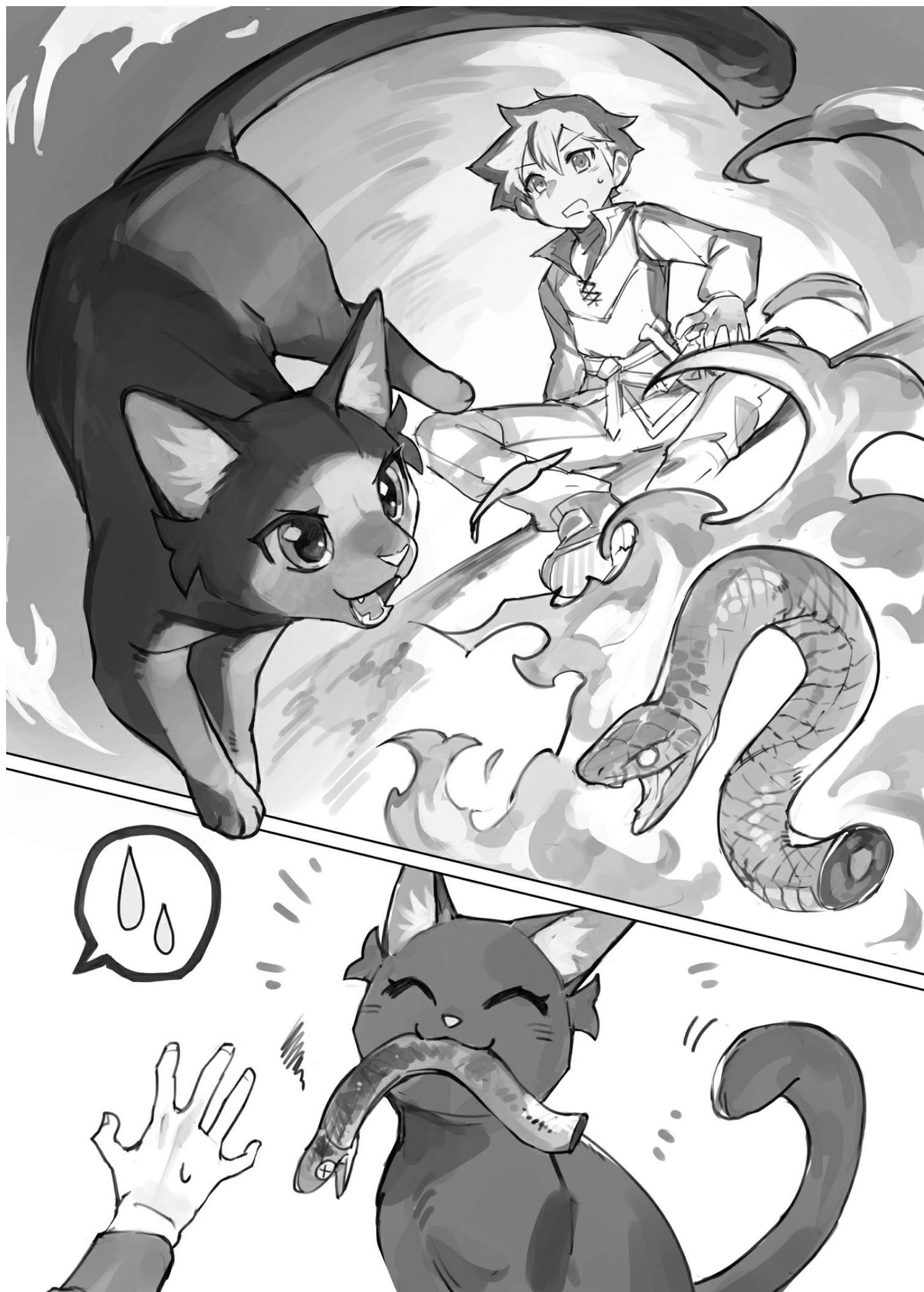
The kitten nibbled a little on the snake, then shoved the rest at me.

Oh, I get it. It’s telling me to eat. But a snake? I dunno about that, I thought, my expression pensive.

The kitten at last seemed to realize something, and laid the snake on the ground a few paces away.

“Meooowgh!!!” it yowled.

What’s up with it? Is it doing some kind of ritual? Just as I wondered this, fire spurted out of the cat’s mouth at the snake, searing it. The smell of cooked meat wafted through the cave. When the fire settled down, the kitten contentedly went back over to the snake, prodded it with its forepaw, and once again brought it to me in its mouth.



“Just because it’s cooked doesn’t mean I’ll eat it. But...it doesn’t smell half bad. If I *can* eat it, then I might be set for food. But the bigger mystery here is you. You’re not just a cat, are you? You must be a monster. But then why have you gotten attached to me?”

A regular cat’s one thing, but feline monsters don’t care much for people. Although, it might be another story for someone with a special ability... As soon as that came to mind, I hastily pulled out my status card and channeled mana into it.

“What is this?!”

Written there was “Derived Skill: <Follower Contract>.” When I tapped for more info, the display popped up with “Follower Contract: Demon Cat (Juvenile).”

As the name suggested, a demon cat was a feline monster. The easiest way to tell them apart from regular cats was their size when full-grown. In rural areas, they were also called “dire” or “giant” cats. They were big enough for a person to ride on their back, and were said to be incomparably stronger than any other monsters in their habitat. Plus, not only did they have breath skills like I’d just seen, they could also use conjuring arts. If you came across one, the wisest decision would be to immediately scam.

One of those, as a kitten...

“Is that...you?”

“Meow.”

Did it understand me or not? The <Demon Cat (Juvenile)> just meowed back as it blithely scritchd itself with its hind leg. Its behavior struck me with an intense protective urge that was hard to resist, and I gently petted its head. It purred loudly, well content. The atmosphere in the cave turned peaceful. However...

“Hold on, let’s not get distracted here. First things first, what is this <Follower Contract> thing you’ve got?” I took another look at the card in my hand, which still clearly displayed “Follower Contract: Demon Cat (Juvenile).”

This <Follower Contract> definitely seemed to be a newly generated skill. I could tell as much because it was listed not under general skills, but under derived skills.

I had the root skill <Holy King>. Root skills supposedly represented a person's core essence. While they were referred to as skills, they were actually more like a person's destiny. That was why they were one's "root."

As for what might display for other people, the most famous examples would be <Swordmaster> or <Demon Emperor>. Root skills were considered a guarantee that one would develop relevant talents as they grew up. There was historical precedent of this, so even someone who was born a commoner would have bright prospects for the future if they gained a powerful root skill. That said, the majority of commoner root skills were just things like <Swordfighter> or <Archer>. The chance of a commoner having a rare skill was one in a million—no, more like one in *tens* of millions.

Meanwhile, nobles had much better chances at getting a good root skill. This was said to be because people with very rare root skills had been reproducing with each other for ages, which eventually led to nobles having above-average abilities on the whole. This also served as logical and practical reasoning behind the system of nobles ruling over commoners. Therefore, nobles ascribed considerable importance to what kind of root skills they gained.

Speaking of which, there were a number of different theories as to when root skills were gained. The Church endorsed the leading theory that the gods bestowed root skills upon a person during their baptism. Frankly, I found that hard to swallow. While it was true that the skills were first displayed after that point, one's status card was also swapped out for a new one when they were baptized. They gave plenty of reasons for this, like that cards degraded as they aged, or that it was a way to congratulate a child upon his or her baptism. But I had a feeling that these were just excuses to cover up some reason why they *had* to switch out cards for new ones at that time.

As it happened, the Church's baptisms were primarily given to nobles, and then to members of influential merchant families and the like. Then how did other commoners get their own root skills? This was a simple matter. Upon turning fourteen, various organizations would send you the card. For example,

if you lived in a backwater village, you'd get it from the village chief. If you went to a guild to become an adventurer, they'd send it out from there. It was the same for merchants. But while nobles received theirs at the time of their birth, the cards of commoners were basically never sent out before the age of fourteen. This system was part of why I doubted the Church's explanation.

Any which way, you wouldn't know your own root skill until you were at least fourteen. That didn't mean you couldn't use skills at all until then, though. Besides root skills, there were also derived skills and general skills. Derived skills were generated based on the person's root skill. General skills were gained in the course of one's daily life, and could be acquired independent of one's root skill.

In my case, I had the general skill <Swordplay 3>. This was gained exclusively through practicing the sword and had no relation to my root skill. If one's root skill was <Swordfighter>, then their Swordplay level would be displayed under derived skills.

There were also instances where a derived skill would concurrently display under general skills as well. In those cases—for example, if a person had <Swordplay 3> under both general skills and derived skills—they would be stronger than someone who only had it under general skills. However, that didn't necessarily mean that the skills added together into something as strong as <Swordplay 6>. It depended on the person, but the rule of thumb was that it'd be around a thirty percent boost.

The relationship between these hadn't been studied in much depth. The Church had prohibited scrutinous research, believing that skills were gods-given and therefore not meant to be questioned. I was of the opinion that properly investigating and identifying these mechanics would allow skills to be used more efficiently. I'd contemplated this time and time again. But as long as I had been living as a noble, the Church was not to be defied. So I simply had to give up on it.

Now that I was on my own, I didn't really care about the Church. I could worry all I wanted, but I didn't know what'd happen if they caught me anyway. I figured I might as well investigate all I wanted.

Because of that, I was all the more curious about <Follower Contract>.

Continuing on, I tapped the <Follower Contract> text on my card. Doing so would let me see a detailed explanation...at least, sometimes it would. Other times it didn't explain anything, but I'd cross that bridge if it came to it. There was no reason not to try. Would it work this time?

"Oh? Looks like an explanation came up. Let's see here. Follower Contract is..."

Follower Contract: A contract made by mutual consent, formed when Noah wishes to take a party under his protection and the other party wishes to receive Noah's protection. The right to annul the contract is granted solely to Noah. The protected party becomes subordinate to Noah...

"That's a pretty technical description. I guess it's a contract that binds me and someone else together if I want to protect them and they want to be protected by me? Sounds kind of unfair if I'm the only one who can cancel it. Then again, Tamer skills work the same way, so I shouldn't be surprised."

This strange skill was listed as being derived from the <Holy King> skill, but this description sounded pretty much the same as <Familiar Contract>, which was often seen as a Tamer skill. It was just that the <Familiar Contract> I'd seen Monster Tamers perform before was more of a spectacle—or rather, it was more complex to perform. Using that skill meant linking a mana path with the monster and marking it with a crest that clearly denoted it as a familiar. But the <Demon Cat (Juvenile)> which had apparently entered under my protection didn't seem to have a crest like that, as far as I could tell.

Maybe I just can't see it...

"Hey, come here for a second, you," I called. The kitten, who had been purring and rolling about, obediently trotted over to me. I picked up the kitten, then turned it this way and that, inspecting its body. Since its skin was covered in fur, I brushed it aside the patches where a crest could be hiding.

“There really isn’t one. Well, it doesn’t really matter if you’ve got a crest or not. Although...”

When monsters were brought into towns by their Tamers, they had to be checked for a crest first. In the future, if I had to go into a town, I’d need to bring this kitten along with me.

“Meow?” The cat tilted its head.

It’s cute, but... Actually, would anyone even see it as a monster?

“If I claim you’re a normal cat, they’d probably let you in as a pet. There isn’t a magic tool that can tell if you’re a monster or not, anyway.”

“Meow!”

“That’ll only work while you’re still as big as a normal cat, though. They say demon cats easily outstrip humans in size when they become adults. I wonder how big you’ll get.”

And at that point, will it even obey me?

Generally speaking, these kinds of Tamer skills couldn’t make a monster obey if it was of a higher skill level than the user. Historically, Monster Tamers had found workarounds for this. One method was to raise a dragon from infancy and then tame it so that they’d have a powerful monster in their thrall which would still obey them as an adult.

Ultimately, though, powerful monsters that greatly surpassed the user’s skills would break free from the yoke of <Familiar Contract> and escape. Those who had Tamer root skills would continue to train so that their monsters didn’t grow stronger than they could control and leave them behind. Just because they left didn’t always mean that the relationship was completely severed, but tamers really did want to stay with their familiars forever.

“Looks like I’ll have to pull myself together too.”

“Meow?”

“Oh, hold on. Looks like there’s more to <Follower Contract>...”

Yes, the basic description was the same as <Familiar Contract>, but there was more after that.

Noah can also borrow the skills of whoever enters under his protection. When a borrowed skill is used repeatedly, it becomes Noah's own skill. In these instances, the source skill is not lost.

"What the heck?!" I'd never heard of something like that.

Borrowing someone else's ability? Does that mean I can borrow this demon cat's skills? How would I even do that...?

I didn't know how to activate it, so I just fiddled around with my card. As I did, I noticed that the <Demon Cat (Juvenile)> text on the <Follower Contract> skill was tappable.

"Oh, so this is the cat's status..."

Name:

Sex: Female

Species: Demon Cat

Titles: Noah's Pet

Root Skills: <Demon Cat 2>

Derived Skills: <Fire Breath 2>

General Skills: <Wind Magic 3>, <Water Magic 2>, <Catfight 3>

"Wait...are you actually stronger than me?"

"Meow?" The demon cat tilted her head cutely.

This adorable creature had derived and general skill levels that rivaled my own. *And* she had water magic, which was an element I didn't have. If I could take full advantage of this, I wouldn't have to worry about water anymore. She also had wind magic. It was likely that this kitten's wind spell <Threadblade>

was what had sliced through the snake earlier.

I did sense a faint stirring of mana for a moment. I can't use that one, though. I guess I couldn't tell because her level's higher. Yeesh, I'm weaker than a kitten? That's sad.

Actually, if a kitten needs to be this strong to survive here, maybe I need to reevaluate how fearsome the Purgatory Forest is. Those goblins were bullying such a formidable cat. Were they actually a bigger deal than I thought? I was desperate at the time, but I did beat them without doing anything special. They didn't seem any different than regular goblins... Well, it doesn't really matter.

"Anyway, do you not have a name? That's to be expected, I guess. But I can't keep calling you 'kitten' or 'demon cat' forever. Do you want a name?"

It was a total mystery whether she'd understood me or not, but she responded with an enthusiastic meow and kneaded with her front paws like she wanted something. That probably meant she agreed.

"All right then. I'll come up with something for you."

* * *

"Okay, I've got it. Your name will be Cath Palug!"

"Meow!"

I picked up the kitten and declared her new name. Cath Palug yowled in agreement.

The name came from an enormous cat of legend which was said to have brought ruin to the kingdom in ancient times, and was supposedly the avatar of spirits. The name would have been a dramatically bad omen if given to any other cat, but considering the spot I'd been left in and this cat's true identity as a monster, it was actually pretty apt.

I'd had a couple other ideas, but they were all uncreative and trite names like "Felix" or "Whiskers." Nothing else decent had come to mind. I'd tried calling the kitten by different names, but Cath Palug—or just Cath—seemed to have her own preferences. This was the name she'd finally responded to.

"I'll call you Cath for short, all right?"

“Mya-meow!”

“Okay!”

Once we were both satisfied, I took another look at my card.

“So your status *did* change. Are the gods actually watching? I don’t really believe what they say, but the Divine Intellect or something like it probably does exist out there.”

Name: Cath Palug

Sex: Female

Species: Demon Cat

Titles: Noah’s Pet

Root Skills: <Demon Cat 2>

Derived Skills: <Fire Breath 2>

General Skills: <Wind Magic 3>, <Water Magic 2>, <Catfight 3>

That was the overview. I could tap on her title and skills, but they were all self-explanatory. The only one that piqued my interest was <Catfight 3>. When I gave it a tap, all it said was:

Catfight: Cat fighting skills developed by cats, for cats.

You’re kidding me, I thought. My Swordplay has a more informative description than that. Maybe this is just how it is for monster skills? If only I could get a Monster Tamer to show me more.

Almost as a rule, the information on your card was considered a matter of life and death, so you wouldn’t show it to others unless it was for something incredibly important. Even in the rare cases where one absolutely had to show

their card, the protocol was to only display the name while making the other sections hidden.

On the subject of hiding details, there were no small number of nobles who held undesirable titles. If they accidentally kept their titles visible when trying to verify their identity, the person doing the verification would be put at risk.

For example, a castle gatekeeper had asked a certain young noblewoman to present her card. In her haste, she had left her titles visible, revealing unflattering things such as <Wallflower>, <Spinster>, and <Overbearing Woman>.

Sometimes, titles could be affected by the spread of gossip and rumors. That was how this kind of thing could happen. The gatekeeper immediately sensed danger upon reading these titles. As he slowly looked up in a panic, he saw the noblewoman glaring at him. She wore a murderous expression, as terrifying as a demon. The gatekeeper was certain that if he made one false step, he'd be put to death. However, nothing of the sort happened. The noblewoman had the good sense to acknowledge her blunder, and entered the castle as if nothing had been amiss.

This story had a sequel. The gatekeeper had then spread word of the noblewoman's actions, and she became known for her forbearance and self-restraint even in damaging circumstances. An earl asked for her hand in marriage, and she went on to have a felicitous wedding. As a matter of course, the disgraceful titles all disappeared, and she likely had completely different ones now. But she must have learned to be more cautious, because her new titles weren't publicly known at all.

Well, that was why you had to be careful about how you handled your card. I could relate. Despite being born into a high-ranking noble home, just because I had some skill called <Holy King>, I was now fighting for my survival in this forest with a cat as my only companion.

Three days passed by. My present circumstances were surprisingly comfortable, and even enjoyable at times. Cath was cute, and food wasn't an issue.

I was grossed out by having to eat snake at first, but it was actually juicy and

rather tasty once it was cooked. In fact, it tasted a lot like chicken. Snake meat wasn't just edible, it was good enough that I wouldn't have minded eating it forever. I was uneasy about whether we could secure enough of them, but Cath would just wander to the back of the cave and catch more, so there was plenty to go around. There were probably a lot of snakes multiplying in this forest, or maybe this cave was just an ideal dwelling for them.

I can't say I'm not worried about poison...but neither Cath nor I have had any stomach problems or other physical symptoms. So it shouldn't be an issue.

"All right, now that I don't have to worry about food and water, it's time to get experimenting. Supposedly I can borrow my dependent's skill. I've been curious but haven't tested it out yet. It'd be bad if I suddenly couldn't move after activating it or something. I should be fine if I'm indisposed for a little while right now." That being my reasoning, I first pondered how to activate it.

I'll check out my card first. When I went to Cath's status display and pressed down on the skill text, something other than its description came up.

"What's this say? 'Borrow this skill?' 'Yes/No'... Guess I'll try pressing 'Yes.'" I was apprehensive, and I could've pressed "No" to see if it'd work with other skills first, but I was a rather impatient person.

Besides, I'm just "borrowing" the skill. I should be able to return it, right? Otherwise, the wording would be different. So it should be okay, I told myself, and waited for something to happen.

And happen it did.

"Wh-Whoa! What's this?"

All of a sudden, I felt something akin to knowledge which I'd never had before rush into my head. It wasn't really the same as knowledge, as I wouldn't have been able to verbally explain what I'd just gained. If I were to compare it to something, it'd be like walking, running, or sitting down. Like I just instinctively grasped something foundational. And as for what *kind* of knowledge it was...

"Cath, can you move out of the way for a second?" I asked. Cath promptly darted behind me.

She understands what I say pretty well. Are monsters smarter than regular

cats? Then again, regular cats seem to understand what you're saying a lot of the time too, so it could be a similar case. But that doesn't matter right now. It's time to test this out...

I focused my power...in my stomach and mouth.

"Here goes... Fire Breath!"

Bwoosh!

Heat rose from my stomach and spurted out of my mouth.

* * *

"I really used Fire Breath." I stared dumbfounded at the outcome. Truth be told, it wasn't all that outstanding.

When Cath had roasted the snake, I'd gotten the impression that she had ample firepower and precise control. What came out of *my* mouth was like a sputtering campfire turned sideways. It didn't feel like I had enough control to use it offensively either. Sure, it'd be good enough for lighting fires. And if there was an enemy in close range, I could use it as a deterrent. If my opponent was weak to fire, it might even do a substantial amount of damage. But that was it.

Basically, my <Fire Breath> and Cath's <Fire Breath 2> were on different levels. Since it was borrowed, I probably couldn't use it at the same level.

Is that what's going on here? I wondered, checking my card. There I spotted <Fire Breath (Temp)> written under derived skills.

"Not 1, but 'Temp'?" I'd frankly never seen that before.

I could understand if it said "borrowed," but what is "Temp"? Does that mean I can only use it temporarily? That reminds me, it said that if I keep using borrowed abilities, they can become my own. So they're just temporary skills until I make them my own?

That was my gut feeling, at least.

Maybe that's knowledge I gleaned through getting <Follower Contract>. Or I could just be completely off the mark. Well, I'll just have to keep using it and find out. I should give back this borrowed status for now so I can confirm what happens when skills are returned.

That was my line of thinking when I pressed and held <Fire Breath (Temp)> on my card. A window popped up, saying “Return <Fire Breath (Temp)> to Cath Palug?” As expected, there was another confirmation prompt below. I pressed “Yes” without a second thought, and the Fire Breath skill vanished completely from my card.

“It’s about what I expected so far. And now...” I reopened Cath’s status and once again pressed down on <Fire Breath>.

It might have seemed strange to repeat what I had just done before, but this was important. Could I borrow a skill again after having returned it? I had to know for sure. If I wasn’t able to borrow it again, I’d need to figure out how to use my ability more efficiently. If I was, then I’d know that my ability could be practically applied without many limitations. I needed to know which was the case. What would it be?

“Oh! Looks like I can borrow it again!” The window I’d seen before reappeared. This was a considerable relief.

All things considered, I’m pretty weak here in the Purgatory Forest, so being able to use at least Fire Breath expands my capability. And the most important thing is...

“Cath, you’ve got Water Magic, don’t you?”

“Mrrp?” Cath tilted her head.

The most essential thing that let her live in the forest—or at all, really—was water. Her skill let her create as much water as she wanted, as long as she had the mana for it. This fact was an incredible windfall for me.

If I can use that skill too, I won’t have to worry about water ever again. I can live off of roasted snake for meals, dropping my risk of dying from starvation to almost zero.

This was a shining beacon for my future. Thus I hoped and prayed as I tapped <Water Magic 2> on my card. Then...

“There we go! ‘Borrow this skill?’ Yeah, you bet I will!” I roared, slamming on “Yes” so hard as to nearly break the card.

Then just like when I had borrowed Fire Breath, I felt the means of using <Water Magic> surge into my head. Without any delay, I chanted the incantation for <Petit Aqua Ball>, the lowest-tier water magic spell.

“Spirits of water, answer my prayer and bestow a droplet here. <Petit Aqua Ball>.”

By default, magic couldn’t be cast without chanting a spell of corresponding length, but if you built up enough practice, you could abridge them. Supposedly the endpoint of this was being able to cast spells without chanting, but I’d never seen anyone who could actually do that. And of course, I wasn’t at a level where I could abridge or omit incantations at all. Only first-class mages were capable of that. An average person like me had no hope of it whatsoever. Although...

“Come to think of it, *you* cast wind magic without an incantation.”

“Meow?” Cath tilted her head and looked at me with great wide eyes.

This monster could cast without an incantation, which even first-class mages had difficulty with. However, her skills weren’t all that high. <Wind Magic 3> denoted a fair amount of expertise, but veteran mages wouldn’t be much impressed by it.

Can she chant without incantations too? It can’t be. I’ve never heard of anything like that before. Cath must just be special because she’s a monster. Well, you can’t exactly expect someone who can only meow to say a whole incantation.

It’s not rare to see monsters that can use magic normally, and they don’t chant either, so it must not be necessary for them. They roar or howl when doing magical things, so maybe that’s their incantation. Or maybe monsters have their own necessary incantations, but they can master abridged or omitted forms easier than us humans. I remember reading something like that in a book, but we really can’t say for sure, since monster ecology is kind of a mystery.

“Okay, that’s enough thinking about stuff that doesn’t have an answer. Right now, I need to fix my dry throat. Cath, you wanna drink too?”

The vessel for ladling water was packed in the bag that Bach and his men had

left.

Looks like they left me with the bare minimum of tableware. I'll give Cath one of those platters as her personal food bowl.

I controlled the small orb of water which I'd created with magic and poured it into my own metal cup, then into Cath's metal platter. I didn't have any finesse with it though, so the water splashed all over and a lot of it was wasted. Still, there was plenty for each of us to drink. But for some reason, Cath didn't lap it up at all. She just kept looking at me.

"Come on, don't be shy. Oh, do you want to toast? All right then, to the beginnings of our life together. Cheers, Cath."

"Meow."

It wasn't much to celebrate, but the *ting* of metal touching against metal was somehow pleasant.

I'm not alone. My companion's a monster, and a cat at that. But she's a good-natured one. With her, I think I can keep on going till I die.

So I believed.



The Holy City of Judith served as the religious capital of Oraculum. At its center was the enormous Arca Cathedral which housed the Church of Astral's headquarters: Curia Sancta. It was said to have been built before the kingdom itself was founded. Thus, while the holy city was some small distance from the royal capital, it was its equal in splendor, albeit in a different sense. Its streets were statuesque and had an air of refined serenity.

Arca Cathedral, which lay at the very heart of the city, was a sacred place which many of the city's residents—and the followers of Astralism as a whole—hoped to visit at least once in their lives. At the same time, it was the nucleus of the Church of Astral.

Two people confidently strode down the hallway of the inner sanctum, a tense atmosphere between them. They were headed for the place where the Cathedral's greatest authority was: the Holy King's office.

"Lord Losgimos, I see that you have also received a summons from our revered Holy King today," said the woman. Her manner of speech was mild, yet her tone suggested something beguiling and devilish. She was clad in fluttery white garments, and she had a mystical air about her. Her light blonde hair and dreamy eyes made her seem almost inhuman. She had a strange presence, as if she was both *there* and *not there* and could evaporate into thin air at any moment. She was one of the Church's small handful of Holy Maidens, and the most powerful among them at that. She was none other than the Holy Maiden of Swords, Aht Heresy.

Her conversational partner was also celebrated for his power. Losgimos Regula, captain of the Order of Paladins, was the very personification of the Church's military might. While his strength was evident at a glance, he still cut a fine figure, and his delicate facial features caused some to mistake him for a woman. However, his constant dour attitude was plain to see. His stern blue eyes flickered toward Aht before he responded.

"I find it unusual as well. It'd be one thing if it were just you or I individually...but for us both to be summoned? Has some grave matter occurred?"

"I do wonder. A certain rumor has reached my ears. Would you care to hear?"

“Go on.”

“Someone with the root skill <Holy King> has appeared.”

“Is that credible?!” Losgimos’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

Aht replied, “Who can say? Either way, the matter cannot go unaddressed. Regardless of how it came about, the crux of the Church is its one and only Holy King. There cannot be a pretender to such a title.”

“A pretender, eh? The Church of Astral already has His Holiness. It’s simply not possible for there to be another Holy King.”

“Exactly. I assume that His Holiness will give you orders to track down the person in question.”

“I take it he’s run away, then?” Losgimos asked.

“According to my sources, he’s the heir of a certain ducal house. They were ordered to surrender him some few days ago, but by that time he was already gone. Though they were questioned as to his whereabouts, they didn’t know where he had gone after being exiled.”

“So they let him get away?”

“That may not necessarily be the case...” Aht said.

“How so?”

“During his baptismal ceremony, the presiding archbishop discovered that the young man had been bestowed with the root skill <Holy King>. He immediately proclaimed this to be blasphemy against His Holiness. Only a few individuals were present to witness this. Other than them, only those under my command know the details. Regardless, the archbishop had brought up the possibility of excommunication on the spot.”

“So the young man’s father feared that his whole family would face the same punishment, and thus disposed of him as soon as he could.”

“Exactly,” Aht said. “They may have thought that if the young man was permitted to stay at home and only later surrendered to us, it wouldn’t sufficiently demonstrate their loyalty to the Church. On the other hand, if he were left in the house, they would have to continue to attend to an

excommunicated person's daily needs. They may have feared censure."

"That sounds plausible. If that's the case, I'd better expect orders to track him down. Still... <Holy King>? How in the world could he get that?"

"It'll likely be your job to ask him."

"Then why were *you* called?"

"As insurance, I assume. It just goes to show how seriously His Holiness is taking this matter."

"Hmm... I understand. Well, we're almost there. Let's hear what His Holiness has to say about it."

"Indeed..."

* * *

Thus the pair had their audience with His Holiness the Holy King, and received their orders. As predicted, they were to apprehend and bring in the person who had ignominiously gained the root skill <Holy King>.

Losgimos moved to obey at once. However, he hadn't a single clue as to where this Noah boy had gone. His pursuit reached an impasse. This was not an indicator of any lack of ability on Losgimos's part, but was rather a testament to how meticulously Noah's father Seto had manipulated information. The knights and servants of House Olipiage were also exceedingly tight-lipped. For all the Paladins' questioning, they were unable to pry out any details regarding Noah's location.

In ordinary circumstances, Noah's safety would have been practically secured. However, there was plenty more that the Church of Astral was feared for. The reason why the Holy Maiden had been summoned was because she had the ability to learn information that couldn't be gained by conventional means. It would not be long before she ascertained and closed in on her target.

* * *

"Mrraow, mrraow!" An adorable cat cheerfully pranced through the forest. She was small now, but I looked forward to seeing how graceful she would become when fully grown.

“Stay close, Cath. It’s dangerous...for me. I’m weaker than you.”

I was strolling with the <Demon Cat> Cath Palug, with whom I had a <Follower Contract>, through the Purgatory Forest as if we were on a picnic.

The Purgatory Forest was well-known as monster territory. It was not a place to blithely wander around as we were doing now. However, there was a reason why we couldn’t avoid doing this. It had to do with the cave we’d taken up as our camping ground. I would have been fine with continuing to stay there, barely going out except when necessary, and living off of snake meat and water magic. But I had started to get a bad feeling around that area. It was unfortunate, but I supposed it was inevitable.

It had started after nightfall. Cath and I had both settled into a sound slumber, but the sheer pressure of it forced me awake all of a sudden. It wasn’t a feeling of being under attack, or sensing someone come into the cave, but...

Jolted awake, Cath and I gave each other a look, and understood from the trembling in our eyes that we were afraid. We knew that there was *something*, and it was probably outside the cave. Something terrifying was right near us. Its presence came across to us loud and clear.

Of course, we could’ve opted to not go check, but this was the Purgatory Forest we were living in—a dangerous place where monsters and animals fought to the death both day and night. Even I knew that neglecting to take constant precaution would be a fatal mistake. That was why, after instructing Cath to stay at my back and staying as quiet as possible, I went to take a look around the outside. There we found...

“Is that a human?” I blurted out upon spotting a humanoid silhouette. But it couldn’t possibly be. First and foremost, it was far taller than any normal human. It seemed to be at least three meters high, if not more.

It was a giant.

There were different species of giants. Some were amicable toward people and were considered demihumans, but others were monsters who reigned supreme as lords of evil and lived to eat humans.

This was said to be because after the ancient war of the gods, they had been

split into those who had sided with the righteous gods and those who had sided with the evil gods. I didn't know how much of that I could trust, but what I did know was that monster giants were extremely aggressive toward humans, and there were a considerable number of known man-eating giants. You would hardly ever come across them in local forests, but it wouldn't be unusual to find one residing in Purgatory Forest.

There's still a chance it's a demihuman... Actually, probably not.

The moment I saw it with my own eyes, I knew. That thing was evil.

It was looking all around with gloomy eyes which seemed submerged in darkness, searching for prey. The sharp claws on its fingers and toes suggested completely uncultured savagery. Its crooked back and witchy nose made it look comical in a way, but that only gave it an even more uncanny vibe. However, it hadn't seemed to notice the cave that Cath and I were staying in. It took a few steps forward, moving farther away.

Ahhh, it's safe now.

As soon as I thought this, the giant, with its back turned, twisted its neck around as if there were no bones inside, and stared in our direction.

I didn't know what it was looking at. But something must've made it want to turn around. I caught my breath. I was absolutely certain that if it attacked, I was dead. My body had decided that running wouldn't do me any good, so I stayed rooted to the spot. Cath was similarly frozen in place.

I couldn't tell how much time passed by. As if dismissing whatever it had noticed as a figment of its imagination, the giant twisted its neck back to its normal position.

Is it just going to leave?

Just as I thought this, the giant's body started to squirm unnaturally, making writhing sounds. In a moment, it had become a single massive lump of flesh.

Then it explosively swelled, taking a new form.

What's going on? I watched with rapt attention. Before I knew it, the giant had taken the guise of a large bird. It wasn't as large as the roc I'd once seen in

the skies of the royal capital, but it was substantially large—as tall as the meters-high trees nearby.

It was a gigantic owl.

It still had the same brutal eyes devoid of reason as when it was in humanoid form, but its overall appearance was strikingly beautiful.

As I should have expected, the owl quietly turned its gaze back this way. It creased its eyes such that I could just barely tell...it was *smiling*. Then with no further delay, it began to flap its wings and vanished into the moonlit night.

“*Huff, huff...* Did it...let us go?” My breath, which had stopped entirely, came back to me at that moment. Cath jumped into my arms, shivering and trembling.

I stroked Cath’s fur and spoke to her. “It’s okay, Cath...or so I’d like to say, but if that guy comes through here regularly, we aren’t safe at all. It could kill us at any time.”

Those were my honest feelings. The way the giant had walked suggested that it was familiar with the area, as if passing along its usual route.

That’s how it must’ve sensed that something was different than usual—us being here.

If it had been coming by every day, it would have noticed us by now. That much told me that it didn’t pass through daily. Still, whether it was a weekly or monthly cycle, it was undeniably dangerous to stay in the area.

That was why I told Cath, “Let’s look for a new place to camp. I hate to do it, and it’s going to be tough finding food without the snakes around, but...staying alive is more important.”

“Mraow,” chirped Cath, as if she begrudgingly agreed.

* * *

We couldn’t stay at that camp forever. That much was clear. The question now was, where would we set up a new camp?

If I remembered my old lessons in monster studies right, that terrifying giant was an ishkitini. They were a race of monstrous giants that could shape-shift

into gigantic owls. It was so atrocious that you'd need a whole party of highly advanced adventurers to fight it. Cath and I wouldn't stand a chance.

And so, we reluctantly departed from the cave. Or at least, we intended to. If those giants were prevalent throughout the Purgatory Forest, we'd be stuck in the same situation regardless of how good our new camping spot was and would inevitably end up as food for one of them. To avoid that, we absolutely had to find a safe abode.

Before we could, though, we had to confirm our assumption and find out whether the Purgatory Forest was filled with monsters like that or not. There had been those common goblins torturing Cath, so we could presume that there were other ordinary monsters living around here. That being said, we hadn't encountered any since then.

Well, that was probably because we'd avoided going out of the cave if we could possibly help it. But if a monster came close to the cave, even if it didn't have an aura as intense as the ishkitini, surely we'd notice it out there.

My ability to sense the presence of other beings was questionably accurate. Meanwhile, Cath was pretty alert, fitting for a monster who'd been living in this forest. There was no way we *wouldn't* have noticed. Yet nothing of the sort had happened so far, not even once. Therefore, it stood to reason that there weren't many weak monsters in this area. They must have built their dens elsewhere, away from the turf of fiends like the ishkitini. That was probably why the cave we'd made camp at had been uninhabited despite the ease of living there.

Sounds logical to me...

A considerable amount of time had passed since we'd started wandering through the forest. Cath led the way for the most part. After all, this forest was practically her backyard. It seemed to me like she was picking paths that were easier for me to navigate.

"Meow?!"

All of a sudden, she cried out. She then pivoted to the side and hid in the thickets. She stared at me as if telling me to do the same. I quickly complied.

“What’s up? ...Ah.”

Not long after we’d hidden ourselves, something approached. It looked like a bipedal pig. Which meant it was...

“An orc. Well spotted,” I whispered. Cath mewed in response.

She really did seem to understand human language to a degree. I wished she could speak with me, but as things stood, we already had enough of an understanding between each other. Things were probably fine this way.

But an orc, huh?

It was a fairly common monster, and would probably be classified as one of the weaker species. But that was purely on an individual basis. Like humans, they often gathered in groups. Depending on the circumstances, humanoid monsters like goblins and orcs could be even more fearsome than awe-inspiring dragons. In large numbers, they could cause massive damage.

Five or ten of them were manageable. A capable adventurer or knight could take on fifty or a hundred of them. But if there were five hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand, what then? With numbers that strong, you’d need an army. Small towns and villages would be instantly wiped off the map if that many goblins or orcs invaded. Even a large city would be forced on the defensive. A warrior or mage of exceptional prowess could easily defeat a horde of that size, but heroes like that didn’t exactly grow on trees. That was why humanoid monsters were scarier than others: because they knew that knowledge was power.

So is the orc over there part of a huge pack? Or is it just roaming on its own? I can’t be sure.

If it was part of a pack and we unwisely killed it, its friends might come after us for revenge. That’d be a total mess.

Orcs were convenient monsters. There wasn’t a single unusable part of their bodies. Their meat was edible and very tasty, and the other parts were used as materials for magic tools or as medicine. Their hides could be tanned and made into bags, accessories, and shoes. I stood to gain a lot from killing it...but right now, I just cared about it as a potential meal. I didn’t have the tools or facilities

to take advantage of its other uses, so those were sadly a moot point. My biggest priority was getting food that wasn't dried jerky. I wanted meat that I could roast and stuff my face with.

I want to hunt it, if at all possible. It'd be tough on my own, but together with Cath, I can make it work. I hope. She's got <Wind Magic 3>, and that's pretty powerful. Enough to chop an orc's head off in one hit.

The issue is whether she can use it on command. We practiced that plenty of times targeting snakes in the cave, so it should be fine. If I give the signal, Cath will fire at the target. But we'd better make sure this orc isn't part of a pack first. Things could get scary otherwise.

It'd be better if I had the option to not live here. As long as I have to keep living in this forest, I absolutely have to consider the possibility of being hunted down.

"Cath, we're going to track down that orc. We'll strike when it's back at its den."

She seemed to understand my intent and meowed in agreement.

* * *

We pursued the orc as it stomped along. Though its giant body appeared sluggish, it was surprisingly fast, having more muscle on it than fat. But orc meat doesn't taste sinewy, so it's like a monster meant for people to eat. Well, maybe that's a bad way to put it. Monsters are living beings too.

Humans hunt and kill them because they pose a danger to us, but by nature they should be free to live as they please. Unfortunately, this one's life had been compromised as soon as I laid eyes on it. It'd have to live on as a part of my body.

Hypothetically speaking, of course. It all depended on whether or not the orc had a pack. Did it, or did it not?

How far have we chased it? It hasn't even been an hour, but we've been walking so much. It's stopped to drink at a watering hole and to gather nuts. It acts more human than I would've expected. It is humanoid, so maybe its lifestyle is just similar to humans. I've heard they're omnivorous, even. Except for them,

'omni' includes human flesh...

If it weren't for that, they wouldn't have been hunted as pests. They'd still probably have been hunted for food, though. Maybe it was hypocritical how orcs potentially eating humans was a problem but humans eating orcs was okay. Most people didn't worry about that, though. If you went down that rabbit hole, there'd be no end to it.

Crustaceans often clung to drowned bodies and the like, so the ones that fishermen pulled up might've gotten fat off eating human corpses. But they were tasty, and that's what mattered.

I probably wouldn't have wanted to hunt and eat an orc that I'd seen chewing on a human, though. Human ethics were like that.

"Oh, we've made it. All right, looks like it doesn't have a pack, Cath."

"Meow."

The orc had come to a dug-out hollow. It wasn't that deep, and I could see the inside from my position. The orc had probably made its den by hand. It was a shabby hole, but that was about the best one could do alone. When they got big enough, orc packs would make fortresses among the trees, but that was mostly when they had a higher-ranked individual commanding them. Regular orcs didn't have the wisdom or planning ability to achieve that, so making a den like that was the best they could do.

The orc sat down ploddingly by the entrance of the cave. It acted no different than a human relaxing at home. It looked like a pig, or perhaps a plump human, but in reality it was a monster that was aggressive toward humans.

And so...

"Let's hunt it, Cath," I said.

"Meow!" Cath yowled enthusiastically in response.

* * *

The method was simple: Cath would deal the finishing blow. That much was decided. This was because I could only use my short sword, which wouldn't be enough to cut through an orc's thick hide on its own. Well, if I used <Wind

Magic 2>, I *could* enhance the power of my sword's edge, but I wasn't sure it'd work at my skill level. If I rushed at the orc but got intimidated up close, my magic might activate at only partial strength or not at all. That would be a fatal error.

Meanwhile, Cath's wind magic blades could be fired from a long distance. She was less likely to get nervous and mess up than me. And if I acted as a decoy, moving around so that she could home in on the target, our chances of success would be even greater.

"Cath, when I give you the signal, take it out in one hit. Got it?"

"Meow!"

"All right, let's go!" I exclaimed, springing out of the thicket. The orc immediately caught notice and headed for me. I quickly ran to the left and diverted its attention to the side so that it wouldn't spot Cath. The orc rushed at me. I drew it in as close as I could...

"Cath, now!" I shouted. Immediately, I felt a powerful accumulation of mana to the right. Low-level though it was, the orc still qualified as a monster and might've been able to feel something too. It looked to its left in surprise, but it was already too late.

Shoop!

I heard something cut through the wind. A clean line formed on the orc's neck, and a spray of blood spurted forth.



A few seconds later, as if time had remembered to move again, the orc's head gradually slipped and fell off. As its eyes still darted around, unable to comprehend what had just happened, it hit the ground with a thud.

Frighteningly enough, the orc's body was still moving around at that point. Given the circumstances, though, I had no obligation to stand around and just let the orc hit me. I swiftly dodged to the side. The orc's body, which couldn't perceive my evasive action, kept going straight forward and collapsed onto the spot where I had just been.

* * *

"Ahhh, this is delicious. It's so tasty, Cath!"

I could feel a slight prickle in my nose. It wasn't the result of an injury, but just because the orc meat was so good I was tearing up.

We were roasting meat from the orc we'd hunted during the daytime. Cath was biting into the meat too. She was a monster, after all, so at first I figured she'd prefer her meat raw. But then when I cut a slice and passed it over to her, she roasted it with her Fire Breath before eating it. That was how I'd found out she liked it better cooked. Now, we were using tree branches as skewers to cook two portions of meat over a campfire.

Since it was hot off the spit, I had to bite into it one piece at a time, but it was so good that I couldn't stop stuffing it into my mouth. I'd tasted orc meat before, but it must've been because I hadn't eaten it in a long time. Or perhaps it was because I'd practically never eaten orc meat this fresh before. To be fair, being able to eat orc meat right after it's been hunted is a privilege limited to the likes of adventurers and knights. That much went without saying.

Anyway, this stuff is really great. It almost makes me feel like power's rising up from deep within me!

Wait...is something actually rising up? I feel a ton of power inside.

I had a sudden revelation about the peculiar sensation. I pulled my status card out of my pocket and took a look. There I saw...

Name: Noah

Species: Normal Folk <Human>

Titles: Former Noble of House Olipiage, Apostate of Astralism, He Who Bears a Mission, Huntsman

Root Skills: <Holy King>

Derived Skills: <Follower Contract>, <Fire Breath 1>, <Flesh and Blood>

General Skills: <Swordplay 3>, <Wind Magic 2>, <Fire Magic 3>

“Wh-Whoa! I-I’ve gotten better! It’s been a whole year since that last happened.”

There were four surprises for me.

The first was the word <Huntsman> listed in my titles. I knew what this was without having to explicitly check it, but I gave it a tap anyway.

Huntsman: One who has firsthand experience hunting a monster. Increases offensive damage against monsters by 1%.

Huh? I was surprised at first. As for why, it was because there was text there that shouldn’t have been present.

“Huntsman” was a title attached to those who had hunted a monster on their own. It wasn’t a title that needed word of mouth to spread in order to obtain it. That was why I had been able to gain it despite being isolated in the forest. Regardless, the <Huntsman> title didn’t have any special effects. It was just a certificate proving you’d participated in killing a monster at least once.

One might assume that it was pointless, but it had some use, especially for nobles. Appearances were everything for the nobility. One who’d killed a monster would be deemed more courageous than one who hadn’t. Of course, there were nobles who didn’t want to brave the danger and went their whole

lives without killing a single monster, and the majority of noblewomen would never do anything of the sort.

Noblemen, however, were expected to have experience killing at least one or two monsters. After all, they would need to protect their country in a time of crisis. That was how they justified their special privileges, at least in theory. So if they'd never killed a monster—in other words, if they didn't have the <Huntsman> title—even commoners would treat them with contempt. That was why it was standard practice for noble sons to venture out with a group of knights and challenge a suitable monster to get the <Huntsman> title before reaching adulthood.

This title couldn't actually be gained just by killing a single goblin. You'd have to take on something on at least an orc's level. The reason behind this was unclear, but the prevailing theory was that goblins were weaker creatures than humans, so they really didn't count as hunting. However, most animals which were commonly hunted, like rabbits, still qualified. There was valid criticism as to why hunted monsters had to be stronger than humans in order to count.

I sided with the critics, having come to the conclusion that a god or whoever must have made up the rules indiscriminately. I didn't necessarily believe in the gods, but I did believe that there was some corresponding higher being. That was how I could arrive at the answer I'd gotten. Realistically speaking, the status card's display was flat-out impossible if something like that didn't exist. Who could know what I was doing when I was all alone in this forsaken forest? If there was anyone, it could only be a divine being.

“‘Increases offensive damage against monsters by 1%.’ Really?”

This was what had surprised me about the explanatory text for <Huntsman>. Normally, it didn't have this effect. It would just say, “One who has firsthand experience hunting a monster.” I'd seen as much on the status cards of other noble sons before my exile. So why was it that *my* <Huntsman> had this effect?

Of course, other titles could have related effects. Some increased your affinity for spirits or augmented your magic. But most titles just gave you another moniker, and that was all. The explanation for this was that just getting a title didn't mean a person changed appreciably. Titles with effects required the

person to have developed significantly enough to be recognized for it. In those cases, the titles simply put that change into words. I could accept that explanation for the most part.

But in that case, is mine displaying this way because I earned the title of <Huntsman> by fighting monsters and also developed enough for my damage to increase? Well, I'd basically never mustered up the courage to face off against a monster before coming to live in this forest. Now that I've gotten used to it, it's not so strange that my offensive capabilities have gone up...by a whopping one percent.

I don't think I'm going to find an answer by thinking about it. But I'm not going to stop thinking as a whole, as long as I'm living in this forest. The moment I abandon rational thought, I'm doomed. The one advantage I have over the monsters in the Purgatory Forest is my human brain. I don't have anything else as I am now.

I had lingered long enough on <Huntsman>. Onto the next.

The second thing that caught my eye was the derived skill <Flesh and Blood>.

This hadn't been there the last time I checked, so it must've shown up sometime in the meanwhile. Derived skills stemmed from root skills, so they could be added while you weren't paying attention. That in itself wasn't unusual. However, they were supposed to only show up once you'd worked hard and fulfilled some condition. I assumed that this was the case for me, but as for what the condition had been, I had no idea.

Well-known root skills like <Swordfighter> or <Water Mage> had plenty of past examples from which to broadly estimate the conditions, but nobody had ever heard of the root skill <Holy King>. Society being the way it was, no research had been done into how derived skills were generated either.

I just have to try my best to gain them one by one. Which means I'll have to experiment a lot.

Incidentally, derived skills could be added throughout one's lifetime. There was no limit to how many someone could have. The average number was about five, but there were people with even more. I didn't know how many I was eligible to gain, but they were rarely disadvantageous, so more was better.

I tapped <Flesh and Blood>...

Flesh and Blood: You are the world. The world is you. Seek out blood. Seek out flesh. For your body is formed from flesh and blood.

“Hey! Don’t get poetic on me all of a sudden!” I nearly threw my card.

But Cath gave a cautionary meow and stopped me with a touch of her paw pads.

“You’re right, Cath... It’s not the card’s fault.” If anyone was at fault, it was whichever godlike being who had come up with these descriptions.

“Still, this is annoying. I don’t get it. What does it mean to seek blood and flesh? I’ve *been* eating meat here... Wait, maybe that’s what it refers to?”

As I grumbled, a thought came to me. *Oh yeah, when I was eating that orc meat, I felt like power was surging within me. Is that the effect of <Flesh and Blood>? Do I get stronger by eating monsters?*

“Hold on, isn’t that a bit too convenient? Yeah, you’re supposed to get stronger by killing monsters, but not by that much. And eating them shouldn’t have anything to do with it either.”

Humans, and in fact all living creatures, were said to partially absorb the power of any organisms they killed that had mana. The exact percentage varied, but it was never very high. Even so, if you defeated dozens or hundreds, it would add up to make a big difference. That was how you wound up with lady adventurers who appeared to have normal builds but could shatter rocks with their bare hands. I’d felt myself get very slightly stronger after killing goblins and orcs, but when I *ate* one, I’d had a similar feeling on a whole different scale.

“I’m absolutely going to need to test this out. Well, I’ll have to keep doing this whether I want to or not, as long as I’m in this forest. For now, let’s just keep it in mind as a possibility...”

* * *

“I’m finally at <Fire Breath 1>! Just like you, Cath!”

Cath meowed as if she already understood. She hit me with a barrage of kitty

punches in celebration. Of course, they were too light to actually hurt. Despite her appearance, Cath was a tough monster. I'd have been dead if she'd attacked me for real. The impact was no more than a regular cat could deal, so I could tell that she was holding back significantly.

"I'm amazed. Borrowed skills really *do* become my own if I keep using them."

The <Follower Contract> text had said as much, but I hadn't been fully convinced. Taking another's skill and turning it into your own? No skill like that had ever been reported before.

General skills were a different story, naturally. Those could be attained through training, and anyone could have them. It was a matter of talent. Just like there was magic compatibility, there was also said to be a certain degree of skill compatibility. However, there were no absolutes as to what one couldn't learn.

That wasn't the case with derived skills. Derived skills sprung from root skills, so normally you wouldn't be able to get them unless you had a relevant root skill. There were a few exceptions, but for the most part, it might as well have been considered unfeasible.

And yet I had attained Cath's derived skill as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

That wasn't all. I could understand if I'd learned a derived skill based on a human root skill. But what I had attained was based on Cath's root skill <Demon Cat 2>. This was especially strange. There were forms of martial arts and magic which imitated monster skills, but normally you would never be able to use the authentic skill. The breath skill known as <Fire Breath> was a prime example. It was said that only monsters could use it.

That was why when I had first seen the description for Follower Contract, I had thought that there must be a limit to learning or using derived skills that I ordinarily wouldn't be able to learn, or that there would be excessive technical issues. I couldn't believe what was written. Yet reality was exactly as the text had described. I had learned <Fire Breath 1>, and when I checked Cath's status, her <Fire Breath 2> was still there.

Now I knew for sure that I had the power to practice a borrowed skill and

make it my own after a certain point. This would be a tremendous advantage while I was living in this forest. Inversely, you could say that this was the minimum I needed to survive in this forest.

“I can actually see a glimmer of hope now.”

Truly, for every curse, there’s a blessing.

Figuratively speaking, my father and Bach were the ones who had cursed me to this forest, and the demon cat Cath was the one who had blessed me with her saving presence.

Before the Fire Breath skill had become my own, it had been listed with (Temp) in its name. When I borrowed other skills or returned the skill, <Fire Breath (Temp)> had vanished from my status. In other words, I couldn’t borrow two or more skills simultaneously. (Temp) skills simply indicated that they were borrowed and temporarily mine.

Well, if there weren’t a limitation like that, this skill would just be *too* convenient. If I could borrow multiple skills—especially if I made Follower Contracts with lots of others—I’d become a juggernaut in no time.

Oh, that reminds me...

“What would happen if I borrowed one of Cath’s other skills right now? Would it vanish?” I tried borrowing Cath’s <Catfight>, then looked at my status. “Oh. <Fire Breath 1> is still there. Not only that, <Catfight (Temp)> is displayed too. I thought that’d be the case.”

Once a skill became my own, it was no longer considered borrowed. Well, that only made sense.

There was another thing that I was curious about.

“Can I borrow another <Fire Breath>?”

I had <Fire Breath 1> already, but what if I borrowed Cath’s <Fire Breath> on top of that? It was easy enough to test.

“Oh? <Fire Breath 1 (+2)>? What’s that mean? Let’s have a look.” I tapped my status card’s display and called up the explanation. There was additional text after it:

Fire Breath 1 (+2): ...Skills with (+2) added can be used with double mana expenditure.

“Double mana expenditure? That’d be pretty strenuous...but if I could pull it off, I’d have way more power on hand. Not a bad deal.” I could use it as my last resort if things got dire.

I later tried it out in an area of the forest where I could hardly sense any monsters. *It’s really powerful, but I can’t use this carelessly*, I thought to myself as I observed the circle of trees burnt to a crisp all around me.

The last thing that struck me was <Fire Magic 3>, but it was just proof that my magic ability had improved. My mana had gone up too, but my control had skyrocketed, and I was now able to use magic of a higher rank. I didn’t get any new knowledge because my skill had improved, though. I’d already learned most of what I knew about magic by studying spells and their formation at the academy. However, either I was severely lacking in skill and mana, or I didn’t comprehend what had been taught, because I hadn’t been able to make use of it. Now that my skill level had gone up, though, I could. That was how it worked.

“Then if I keep up the pace and attain a bunch of skills...”

Eventually, I might be able to get out of this forest and find my way to a town somewhere.

“I can dream again, Cath.”

“Meow!”

We smiled at each other.

Perhaps it was too modest an ambition for an ex-noble, but if I could just lead a life with human dignity, that was good enough for me.

Chapter 3: Capturing a Base

“Good job finding this place, Cath. Your sense of smell really is impressive.”

“Meow.”

We spoke to each other in hushed tones as we hid in the grass. Ahead of us lay a homely sight, one which hardly seemed to belong in a place teeming with powerful monsters like the Purgatory Forest. The trees here had been cleared away. There were a handful of small, shabby houses built from tree trunks and branches, their occupants going in and out of them.

From what I could see, this would be a fantastic place to set up our new base. If there were any issues to speak of, it was that the residents of this small settlement weren't normal folk. In fact, they were monsters.

Though they walked on two legs, they had no visible skin nor a human-shaped head. Instead, their short-statured bodies were covered in bushy fur and their heads resembled a dog's. Their appearances fit the description of a monster species called hound sprites, or kobolds.

“If only it were possible, I'd like to negotiate and ask them to let us live here... But I don't think that's happening,” I mused.

“Mya-meow,” Cath meowed in agreement.

Other monsters generally weren't kind like Cath; rather, they were typically the opposite. Cath had been such a good friend that I almost felt like I could befriend other monsters too, but they were all hostile toward humans by nature. The only people who could truly live amicably alongside monsters were those who had Tamer abilities. Well, some Tamer abilities could be learned as general skills, so everyone had the potential to become friends with monsters if they put in the effort. But that was just armchair theory.

Regardless, it'd be difficult for me to forge a friendly relationship with these kobolds here, at least so quickly. That was why...

“Nothing else for it. Let's attack 'em, Cath.”

“Meow!”

I got to my feet. Cath jumped out of the grass, dashing toward the kobolds. I also kicked off the ground and headed for the kobold settlement.

* * *

“That went better than I expected.”

“Meow.”

I glanced around at our surroundings. The kobolds lay defeated on the ground. However, that was only five of them. Two others were walking around, attending to their fallen brethren. These ones no longer had any intent to attack us. Of course, that was only natural since we’d made them completely submit.

Befitting of being called “hound sprites,” kobolds shared many similarities to dogs. In particular, they had an instinct to obey an alpha. Humans took advantage of this to make them obey and work in places like mines. They were very good at detecting ore with their noses, so they were actually one of the monster species that had a close relationship with humans. That was why I’d decided to make the kobolds let us live peacefully with them in their settlement.

We could’ve just killed them all on the basis that they were monsters, but that posed some problems. First, if we killed them here, the wafting stench of blood would attract monsters. If worse came to worst, we could wash it away with my wind magic and Cath’s water magic. But the other problem was that deep in my heart, I felt a sort of affinity toward the monsters and didn’t really want to kill them.

It must be because I’ve been getting along well with Cath. Or maybe there’s some other reason. I don’t know, but...

I was contradicting myself. I knew I *had* to kill monsters for a multitude of reasons, be that sustenance or safety. I just didn’t want to kill these kobolds, and so I followed my heart this time.

Maybe it’s because the way they live is a lot like humans. That would’ve made me feel a lot more guilty. I’d kill goblins without hesitation...or the brutal giant that was prowling outside the cave, if only I was able.

Humans are so selfish. Scratch that, I'm selfish, I criticized myself.

While contemplating this, I noticed that most of the kobolds had woken back up. None of them were quite able to move yet, but their wounds weren't deep. I hadn't fought them with my short sword—I'd used my bare hands.

<Catfight>, which I'd borrowed from Cath, had proved extremely useful. It was a powerful skill. Even the (Temp) level had been more than adequate for subduing the kobolds. What's more, it had let me restrain myself so that I didn't injure them. Cath had done the same thing, though of course hers was at a higher level. She'd stood up on two legs, which she never did otherwise, and nimbly dodged the kobolds' attacks as she pummeled them with her paw pads and knocked them out. She looked rather comical doing it, but at the same time she exhibited remarkable technique.

I was a bit more clumsy, and since I didn't have paw pads, I couldn't hold back as well as Cath.

Maybe once I reach level 1 or 2 with the skill, I'll be able to exert some more control? I can't be sure. Still, I should keep working on it in the future.

Oh, right! I suddenly remembered, and addressed the kobolds.

"Okay, looks like you're all up. Do you recognize me?"

* * *

When I called out, the kobolds around me pricked up their ears. They seemed willing to listen. Winning against them must have triggered their instincts, just as I'd hoped.

I still don't know if they'll understand what I say, though. Well, I'll just talk to them like I would with a dog or a cat. Cath can only meow, but we still understand each other. I should be able to talk with kobolds too...

"You lost to me. You understand that, right?"

I'll start with a jab. I shouldn't underestimate them.

I spoke with a slight domineering tone. The kobolds trembled. However, they didn't quite seem to understand the meaning of the words themselves. The kobolds turned to each other and conversed among themselves. I imagined

their reactions were along the lines of:

“Hey, what was that about?”

“It sounded scary...”

“You think he’s gonna slaughter us after all? This is terrifying!”

Hmm? Did I take the wrong approach?

I changed my tone and tried again. “Anyway! Cath and I are going to live here! You don’t get to say no!”

I added in some gestures as I spoke. This time, the meaning seemed to get across. Their expressions suddenly brightened up. Then the kobolds approached and sniffed us.

What’s this about?

“Woof woof? (You’re going to dwell alongside us?)”

“Woof! (Someone so mighty is allying himself with us? Milord!)”

Along with the dog—er, kobold barks, I could hear strange, anachronistic voices.

What’s going on? I wondered. Then it hit me. I took a look at my status card, and...

Follower Contract: Demon Cat (Juvenile), Hound Sprite x10, Hound Trooper x2

Just as I thought. Apparently these kobolds had chosen to follow me. Well, I’d more or less figured that out by the time I’d defeated them in battle. What still bothered me was why I hadn’t heard these voices before.

I think it’s because I explicitly conveyed my intent to live here to them just now.

A Follower Contract is still a contract. It probably isn’t established until both parties are in accord. I thought that since the kobolds utterly lost, they’d have to obey me. But the contract didn’t go into effect until I accepted them. Once I

clearly thought that I wanted to live here without chasing out the kobolds, the contract was formed.

That was probably what had happened. I imagined that there were other specific conditions to meet, but since the explanatory text wasn't all that precise, I couldn't be sure.

Things are going so well, I'm scared there's a catch somewhere. But I'm not about to stop using this skill. It's my lifeline, after all. So I've got to keep experimenting and figure it out.

The contract itself was one matter, but there was something else on the status card that I found strange. "Hound sprite" referred to the kobolds, but "hound trooper" was a type of monster which evolved from them—otherwise known as kobold soldiers. Unlike regular kobolds, kobold soldiers had excellent physical capabilities and could even use bladed weapons. Regular kobolds could handle sticks at best, and were more like...fluffy goblins in terms of strength. Meanwhile, a single kobold soldier was as strong as several goblins combined.

However, if this settlement had included kobold soldiers from the start, Cath and I wouldn't have been able to take it over so smoothly.

Did they show up all of a sudden? But then why would they...

Two kobolds who were noticeably larger than the rest of the throng kept talking as I wondered this.

"Woof? (Where would you prefer to live? Please choose whichever house you like!)"

"Woof! (Milord, this house here is of fine quality! I built it personally, from some of the most solid timber in the forest!)"

Those voices earlier must have come from these two. They're making two sounds at once.

The other kobolds only made the usual dog-like noises. These two individuals must have been the exception.

"Hey, you and you."

"Woof? (Are you addressing me?)"

“Woof! (You’re talking to me?!)”

The two reacted each in their own ways. One of them sounded comparatively old, but didn’t really look the part. The other one had a high, lively, youthful voice. It spoke not quite in an archaic fashion, but more like a knight.

“Yeah, I’m talking to you two. Besides, you seem to be the only ones who understand what I’m saying.”

“Woof woof?! (Wh-What?!)”

“Arf! (We can speak with you, master?!)”



This was enough to prove that they could understand what I was saying too. Whether their comprehension included all human speech or just my own would require further investigation. But that would require a human other than me to talk to them, and there were no candidates for that at the moment. I'd be at an impasse if I tried to investigate that now, so I gave up on it.

I can do that sometime later. What's important right now is these guys.

"Yeah, it seems like it," I said, continuing from where we'd left off. "Anyway, you guys are kobold soldiers, right?"

"Woof? (Kobold soldiers? What in the world are those?)"

"Woof... (I don't really know...)"

Well, I kind of expected that. Humans just arbitrarily came up with monster names, so I doubt they'd get what I'm talking about.

I tried asking something else. "Do you know what a kobold is?"

"Woof! Woof woof! Woof! (Yes, I know! That is what we are! Right, milord?!)"

"Woof woof. Woof woof woof. (Of course, master. I understand it refers to us proud hound sprites.)"

They certainly seem to know their own species. What I'm saying in human terms is getting across just fine. So then what was up with my last question?

I decided to keep up my line of inquiry. However...

"Huh? You guys aren't hound sprites. Were you hound sprites until just a few minutes ago?"

My question made the pair tilt their heads in confusion. A moment later, they looked at each other and opened their eyes wide in confusion.

"Woof?! (A-Are you an exalted hound *champion*?!)"

"Woof woof? (No, I'm not. But aren't *you*?)"

* * *

After hearing what they had to say, it was evident that the two kobolds—rather, the kobold soldiers—had previously been regular kobolds. They talked

among themselves for a short while and quickly realized they knew each other. That much was made clear by sharing past anecdotes, like when one of them had been fascinated by its own reflection in the water when it went to the lake, or when the other had cursed out of frustration for not being able to pick grapes that were out of reach. Both of them had their full memories of the time when they were plain kobolds.

“Woof! (How is it that I’ve become a hound champion?!)”

“Woof woof! (I’m not worthy of it! This is a mystery!)”

Neither of them had a very high estimation of themselves, apparently. “Hound champion” must have been the word that their kind used to refer to kobold soldiers, so I asked them more about it. They told me that kobolds were monsters that formed small settlements and packs, and they lived by hunting and gathering in groups. The pups were raised with care in the settlements, where they were nurtured until adulthood and taught how to survive.

I might have teared up a little at that part. I couldn’t help but compare it to the situation I’d been placed in. They were a hundred times more caring than human society. It made me wish that I’d been born a kobold instead.

But reality wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows. Kobolds had many children, but in the Purgatory Forest, only one or two out of a litter of five had a good chance at survival. The rest would all die. This was considered normal. However, it wasn’t caused by neglect. The real, tragic reasons were that they got eaten by more powerful monsters that roamed the forest, or they starved to death from not being able to secure enough food in such a harsh environment.

Actually, I probably only perceived this as tragic because I’d had a rather indulgent upbringing as a human. At least, I’d never had to worry about my next meal or keep watch for predators. Well, there was the risk of having poison mixed in my food or being killed by an assassin. Those things were surprisingly avoidable if you stayed on your toes, though.

Anyway, this was why kobolds had an extremely strong pack mentality and remembered each other well. Yet the two kobold soldiers who could speak with me hadn’t even realized what they’d become. If I were to hazard a guess, it was because they’d only taken these forms in the last few minutes. Specifically,

immediately after forming a Follower Contract with me. That would explain why they'd only just noticed.

When I told them my theory, they were both full of questions.

“Woof? Woof woof. (‘Follower Contract,’ you say? Hmm... I certainly can’t conjure any feelings of disloyalty toward milord, despite being determined to drive you out mere minutes earlier.)”

“Woof? Woof woof?! (What does this contract entail? Is it what allows us to converse?!)”

I answered them. “I think it’s safe to say that the Follower Contract is part of why you can talk. But the other kobolds who can’t speak also have contracts. I think your evolution is the more relevant reason for this. That’s what I’m curious about. Do you two have any ideas as to what sets you apart from the other kobolds?”

If I could narrow down the cause, I could make the other kobolds evolve too, which would increase my fighting potential by extension. Since I’d made Follower Contracts with them, I’d definitely be using—er, working together with the kobolds in this forest, but I wanted to minimize our losses wherever possible.

This was the Purgatory Forest. I knew that as long as I was living here, I couldn’t guarantee that all my allies would make it out alive from every situation. Even still, I’d made a contract with them. Like the name “Follower Contract” suggested, they were subordinate to me...but in truth, I didn’t want to treat them as mere slaves. On the contrary, I wanted to live alongside them. So I didn’t want to make reckless choices that would lead to their deaths. I wanted to arrange things so that we could all live as happily as possible.

That’s what the Follower Contract is about. If I really had to say, I think my feelings toward them are protective. Well, it’s pretty conceited for a puny human like me to say that, especially here of all places.

I had been forsaken by both my country and family. I didn’t want to do the same to these monsters. I didn’t know if I could pull it off, but it was certainly worth trying. Those were my genuine feelings.

The two kobold soldiers also told me that “hound champions” were what they called mighty leaders who spawned on very rare occasions amid the kobolds’ rugged day-to-day life. True enough, I’d heard that there were uncommon cases of kobold soldiers with normal kobold parentage.

Actually, the same went for lots of different monsters. There were higher-ranking goblin soldiers born from goblins, poison slimes which had divided from normal slimes, and so on. There were plenty of theories as to how this happened, but nothing definite. I was an advocate of the theory that, roughly speaking, it was a necessary adaptation to the environment. But there were other plausible reasons out there, so it wasn’t easy to pin down anything for certain.

To give a basic example of environmental adaptations, monsters living near poison swamps would typically change into species that had poison resistance. Although, a simpler possibility was that there were lots of other monsters born without resistance that just all died off.

It could have had something to do with their diet too. I’d read a scientific study which found that the progeny of monsters which ate lots of highly nutritious foods would be bigger in size and were more likely to be a higher-ranked species.

I’d wondered how they managed to conduct such a dangerous experiment, but it was probably done with the cooperation of people with Tamer skills and support from the government. That had been a long time ago, though, and they probably wouldn’t receive funding if they tried to do it nowadays. The present government really didn’t seem to have any interest in monster ecology, nor could they afford the time or resources for it. Matters were already tight enough as they were with power struggles and wars against other humans.

I could almost rationalize my own exile as just another one of those things.

I get it. It’s tough dealing with someone who’s got a bogus-sounding skill like <Holy King>. But I don’t plan on dying. Not at all.

I’d almost given up at the start, but even after getting tossed into the Purgatory Forest, I’m actually managing to build a future. I met Cath, and the kobolds will obey me.

And this was all possible through the tremendous power of the <Holy King> derived skill <Follower Contract>. I was inclined to assume that <Flesh and Blood> would prove valuable as well, but I didn't know enough to be sure at the moment. I'd probably learn about it a little bit at a time, so I'd have to save my judgment for later.

Regardless, speaking of <Follower Contract>, I used it to check out the normal kobolds' statuses. For all fourteen of them, it looked more or less the same:

Name:

Sex:

Species: Hound Sprite <Kobold>

Titles: Noah's Subject

Root Skills: <Hound Sprite 7>

Derived Skills:

General Skills: <Bite 2>, <Scratch 2>, <Dash 1>...

First and most obvious, each individual's sex was recorded as male or female. Second, the listed species had a slight variation for the four pups who lived in the kobold settlement. They displayed as <Hound Sprite (Juvenile)>, similar to Cath. Apparently the status card made a distinction between juvenile and mature monsters.

On a related note, human children didn't have (Juvenile) on their status display. Ordinary children wouldn't know this because they didn't receive a card until they came of age, but nobles like me received cards from the Church at birth to check our abilities. It was just that the root skills part wasn't visible, or rather that it was an empty row. If you believed what the Church said, it was because children didn't have root skills yet. Anyway, the display for species just said "normal folk."

Do "juvenile" and "mature" not apply to humans? I don't think that's the case. We have children and adults. Maybe the term "juvenile" just doesn't fit. I could

kind of understand that. Why not just say (Young), then? But that'd make it (Old) for adults, and that'd be weird. They aren't necessarily a (Parent) either. How about (Grown-up)? Nah, that doesn't quite work.

Maybe that's what the gods thought too. Well, I guess it doesn't matter.

In any case, the kobolds' statuses didn't appear particularly strong, though their root skills were higher than Cath's <Demon Cat 2>. <Hound Sprite 7> was the highest value among them, with the rest ranging from 1 to 6, but it would be best to assume that they had the potential to go higher. You'd see stuff like <Swordfighter 8> for humans, and monsters could raise their root skill level as well. For humans, the maximum value was 10. If someone raised their <Swordfighter> root skill to 10, they could get an additional root skill. There were instances where they didn't, but in most cases, some different root skill would be added, and they could continue to grow while the previous one remained active. This was generally taken as a sign that the gods were encouraging humans to grow, but I remained skeptical.

* * *

"Okay, looking good! Liber, take the right! Mataza, go left!"

At my command, the two kobold soldiers broke out running. We were near the Purgatory Forest settlement.

They were remarkably fast—much faster than any normal kobold, naturally. But these two weren't normal kobolds. They were kobold soldiers.

When I had checked their statuses, I'd seen that all of their skill levels had gone up. The root skills section also had <Hound Soldier 1> in addition to <Hound Sprite 10>. I'd previously wondered how monster evolution worked, but this led me to believe that it was prompted by gaining a new root skill after maxing one out. For humans, when <Swordfighter 10> was reached, <Great Swordfighter 1> would be added, but it didn't really change their species or appearance. That didn't seem to be the case with monsters. The fact of the matter was, the two of them weren't kobolds—or hound sprites—but were rather kobold soldiers—or hound troopers.

As for what I had instructed them to do, that much could be easily guessed by looking in the direction which they were headed. There was a humongous orc,

several times the size of myself, Cath, or any of the kobolds. It was twice as huge as a grown man. Still, that was about average for an orc. It really emphasized the differences between species.

However, they were one of the weaker kinds of monsters. They had large bodies, but they didn't have enough physical strength to properly support their own weight. As a result, they weren't very fast. And while they had raw power, they didn't have the intelligence to use it efficiently.

The higher-ranked ones were a different story...but just a single individual—one you might call a “straggler”—didn't make for a very formidable opponent. If you were a well-trained warrior or had a coordinated party, that is.

As for us, we had a rather unbalanced party of a human, a demon cat, and two hound troopers. We'd only just met each other, so our coordination honestly left a lot to be desired. It might've been too early for us to take on an orc. But the kobolds—our whole group, actually—were making the attempt regardless. This was because our settlement was in dire need of food, after all.

If it were just me and Cath, we could get by on bugs and plants if it came down to it. But the kobolds were extremely skinny, and I got the impression they'd all drop dead from starvation if nothing was done. There were still three more kobold pups who were severely nutritionally deprived, even more so than the rest. They hadn't shown themselves when I attacked the settlement because they *couldn't*. They had been lying down in the kobolds' shabby houses at the time.

When I first saw them, I had made up my mind: the first order of business would be to get food. I'd get them a good meal...and I could figure out everything else after that. I didn't know how long I'd be living this way, but since I'd decided to coexist with them in this forest, I had a responsibility toward them as the dominator of this settlement. And that included providing food for them.

Landowners were the same way. Well, it was questionable how many land-owning nobles in my former country took their responsibility seriously. At the very least, my father did his duty. I now wanted to do him proud, as his son.

I was thinking about this because of what I'd seen on the statuses. Every

single one of the kobolds had <Noah's Subject> in their titles. When I tapped on it, it said:

Noah's Subject: One who has sworn to follow Noah and has been promised his protection.

I was confused for a moment. *Sure, maybe the kobolds swore to follow me. But did I ever swear to protect them?*

It might've been a result of <Follower Contract>. That wasn't in Cath's titles, so I thought there might be something that distinguished her from the kobolds. Cath instead had <Noah's Pet>, which read as:

Noah's Pet: One who has sworn to follow Noah, whom Noah is partially dependent upon in turn. Preferentially protected by Noah.

So it's a matter of priority? And I'm dependent on her too? I suppose that makes us equals, to an extent.

The details were vague and unreliable as usual, so at the moment, I didn't know how much of this I could trust. To be fair, if I absolutely had to choose between Cath and the kobolds, I'd definitely pick Cath. It wasn't that I considered the kobolds expendable, but Cath was the biggest reason I could keep on living right now. Without her, I'd have died miserably.

Conversely, she could've been killed by those goblins if I hadn't come by. We'd made it this far because we had each other. In that sense, we certainly were equals.

These thoughts occupied my mind as I fought. The two kobold soldiers called out to me.

"Woof! (Milord! The finishing blow!)"

"Woof woof! (Now's your opportunity!)"

Yeah, it's right about time.

Our attacks were wearing out the orc, leaving it winded. We could strike its vitals soon. It wasn't very injured, but if we hurt it too much, there'd be less usable portions. We'd talked it over and decided to kill it with as few hits as we could possibly manage.

On cue, I took my opportunity to strike while the two hounds acted as a distraction. I swerved around behind it and cut off its head with my short sword. Blood spurted out, and the orc violently flailed its arms for a while. But gradually it grew weaker, until it finally fell flat on the ground with a heavy thud.

* * *

In the darkness of night, a small red flame crackled as it burned, dimly illuminating the dense forest. The flame was surrounded by tree branch skewers laden with meat. Juicy fat sizzled off it, carrying a delectable smell across the whole place.

The Purgatory Forest was so perilous that even the bravest adventurers rarely dared to enter, so I was concerned about whether it'd be safe to openly cook meat if the smell got around. But when I asked the kobold soldiers, they said it'd be fine, because you could often smell cooked meat coming from somewhere already.

How are they smelling that in this forest? Are there humans here?

But the pair of hounds answered my question right away.

“Woof. (It's because there are lots of fire-breathing monsters.)”

“Woof woof, woof. (Flying dragons like to bake their prey in caves while airborne. It's risky to go in caves.)”

“Urk... Looks like we were living in a pretty dangerous spot, Cath...”

“Meow.”

We looked at each other and sighed.

Come to think of it, Cath was a fire-breathing monster too. I'd seen her fry snakes, and she'd probably roasted other prey before I met her. I could tell how

much she liked flesh from the way she was gobbling up orc meat.

This stuff really is delicious...

It was one of the more readily available monster meats in Oraculum, but it goes without saying that it was more prized than meat from regular livestock and had the price to match. It was too expensive for ordinary people to eat on a regular basis. Even so, it was affordable enough to splurge on as a rare luxury. It had a reputation as an ingredient for special occasions.

Of course, there were even higher quality monster meats out there. Meat from the higher-ranking orc species tended to be even tastier, though that wasn't *always* the case since some of them had poisonous evolutions. However, the human appetite was insatiable. In some regions, they could process even poisonous orcs into something delectable. I'd never eaten it myself, though. Honestly, I'd be too scared to try. I knew the terrors of poison firsthand from the many times I'd almost been assassinated.

I'd wondered what would be the point of assassinating someone as insignificant as me, but that was something I could only say in my current position. Before, I'd been seen as the heir to House Olipiage. A lot of people would have stood to gain something by removing me from the picture. They were probably grinning from ear to ear at the news of my exile. Just imagining it annoyed me...

Well, I couldn't do anything about it.

"Mataza, Liber. Are the kobold pups eating their fill?" I asked the two kobold soldiers.

Incidentally, Mataza and Liber were the names that I'd given them. It was normal for monsters to not have names unless they were special individuals, but it was inconvenient for me to not have something to refer to whomever I was talking with. That was why I'd named them.

The male who spoke in an archaic fashion and called me "milord" was Mataza. It was a name from the East that I'd seen in a book once. Mataza seemed to like the name a lot.

Meanwhile, the knight-like female who called me "master" was Liber. I took

this from the name of an ancient hero of Oraculum. When I'd told her this, Liber had been delighted. She seemed to like her name just as much.

Since both of them had been so pleased with their names, the other kobolds had started to look at me with puppy dog eyes. Unable to refuse, I gave them all names. I put a lot of thought into each one of them, so it took a while. I doubted that I'd remember them all, but it wasn't an issue because the names I gave them were reflected on my status card.

I was grateful for that...but I really did get the feeling that someone out there must be watching me—and the whole world, in fact.

Well, it's better than nobody watching at all. I'm not all on my own, of course. I've got Cath and the kobolds with me now.

Even so, I admittedly felt a little lonely that there weren't any humans around.

This must be the kind of depression that comes with straying from the flock.

Back when I was in the royal capital and the duke's territory, I'd mostly stayed at home. I had rarely come into contact with large groups, except at parties. Even so, I had some awareness of being part of a community. I'd been completely driven out of that community with my exile...so I instinctively felt some loneliness. I pondered this.

"Meow? Mya-meow." Cath nudged me and flopped down on my lap.

She wants me to pet her?

I rubbed her belly, and she stretched out contentedly. She might've been trying to comfort me in her own way. The kobolds came up to me too and offered me meat. Liber and Mataza approached me as well.

"Woof? (Master, are you feeling ill?)"

"Woof woof! (Tell us if there's anything wrong, milord!)"

I suddenly felt silly for worrying about all this. I replied with an apologetic smile. "Nah, don't worry about it. I was just thinking about times gone by."

My country and the people I'd known had probably forgotten about me by now. The fate of a noble abandoned in this forest was a foregone conclusion. It

was quite likely that everyone thought I was already dead. While this was sad, it also worked in my favor. So part of me hoped this was the case...

But I would later learn that I had no such luck.

Chapter 4: A Disturbance

“Woof!”

The kobold pup which had just been tussling around in the river—I think its name was Fee—showed me the fish it had caught, and smiled.

The kobolds were more expressive than I had expected. They were affectionate toward me, for one. I’d had a preconceived notion that since kobolds were monsters, they’d be vicious by nature, but they turned out to be very social and intelligent creatures. They were less like monsters and more like demihumans.

“Demihuman” was a term for peoples who were similar to common humans but had their own unique characteristics. However, the word could often be used in a discriminatory manner, so it was mostly said by humans and those who wanted to ingratiate themselves with them. So instead, they were generally referred to as “mankind” or “people.”

Considering their position, this was perfectly logical. Their pride as a species wouldn’t tolerate a shameful name that implied them to be lesser than humans. In fact, from their perspective, common humans must have looked like the inferior species. After all, we had shorter life spans, weaker magic, and no prominent redeeming qualities. All we had was unparalleled reproductive ability.

Actually...our thirst for war and proclivity to wipe out other people could also count, although that was a cynical interpretation. Even so, it was the truth. That was why I’d been driven from my homeland. And though I was living alongside monsters now, things were much more peaceful than they’d ever been when I’d lived among other humans. Was this comical irony, or was it a blessing in disguise for me? It could be either one.

If my homeland invited me to come back now, how would I respond? Would I answer right away, or hesitate? And if I did, what would I say? Mulling it over, even I couldn’t predict how I’d respond in that situation. But...

“Woof!”

“Oh yeah, you caught a big one. We’ll be eating good tonight.”

“Awooo!”

I petted the kobold pup that had caught the fish. This seemed to incite jealousy in the other kobold pups, who doggedly began to confront the river themselves.

Just moments ago, they were ready to give up. That’s incentive for you. Well, humans are also better motivated when there’s a reward. But the kobolds are more genuine and cute about it. Humans don’t want to be petted as a reward, they want money or power. They’re really beyond saving.

Well, that doesn’t make a difference to me anymore.

“Okay, everyone, time to head back. If the other kobolds are doing as well as you, there’ll be plenty of fish to go around.”

I’d come here with just the pups. The other kobolds had their own fishing grounds and were eager to go there instead. We could’ve gone with them, but apparently it was a rather dangerous spot and they were against bringing along the novice pups. The pups’ parents were especially opposed to that.

So I ended up taking care of the pups, and had Cath watch over the kobolds going to the regular fishing grounds. Of course, not even Cath could fully guarantee their safety in the Purgatory Forest. But around here, where strong monsters rarely popped up, she was a tough cookie. We hadn’t encountered any unbeatable opponents for a while now.

I told her to run away immediately if she does come across something that strong. They should be fine.

I’d told this to Liber and Mataza as well, but had instructed them to make sure Cath got away even if it cost them their own lives. This further reduced my fears of Cath getting killed, but I obviously didn’t want the two of them or any of the other kobolds to die either. I’d warned them to keep a constant eye on their surroundings so that as many of them could safely escape as possible.

But I hadn’t imagined in the slightest what was about to happen.

I had been a fool.

* * *

“What the— Cath! And Liber, and Mataza! What happened?!”

When the kobold pups and I got back to the settlement, we found multiple wounded kobolds lying on the ground. Their injuries weren’t severe, but they were by no means minor either.

Monsters are resilient, so I don’t think they’ll die, but these could become life-threatening if they get infected. I have to give them first aid...

I carefully applied a medicine I’d made with herbs I’d found while roaming around the forest, and demanded answers.

“Meow...” Cath bowed her head with shame.

Liber added, “Woof... (Master, Lady Cath gave her utmost to protect us. She did everything she could to ensure our escape, in fact...)”

“What happened?”

Mataza answered. “Woof woof. (The forest exploded all of a sudden. A glaring light assaulted us, and in the next moment, the surrounding forest was burnt to a crisp.)”

“I’m glad you made it out. It looks like everyone survived, luckily.”

“Woof, woof woof. (We have Lady Cath to thank for that. She put up some manner of...defensive wall.)”

I took a look at Cath’s status on my card, and found that a new general skill had been added: <Magic Barrier 2>. General skills were learned through training or some triggering event, but Cath had gained a new power in the face of danger.

I checked and discovered that the other kobolds had learned new skills as well. The two hound troopers in particular had their skill levels boosted across the board.

How did that happen? There were only a handful of ways this was possible. In this instance...

“They must have fought against something.”

Domestic skills like sewing or cooking didn't improve through combat. Well, cooking included wielding knives, so technically one *could* hone their skills through dismembering monsters, but that was an exception. But combat skills, like Cath's <Catfight> or the kobolds' <Scratch>, would increase in level with more combat experience. Fighting stronger enemies would dramatically raise your level, if you survived. This was probably the explanation behind everyone's sudden remarkable growth.

Liber responded. “Woof...heem... (After the light appeared, a human clad in white approached us...)”

Mataza continued. “Ruff... Ruff woof, woof. (She was mumbling something to herself. If I remember correctly, it was... ‘He should be around here somewhere, but I don't see him. Perhaps I'll have better visibility once I burn everything to the ground.’)”

There was no way I could pretend I didn't know what this meant. It was my fault that they'd been attacked.

They've come for me.

White clothes signified the Church of Astral. The Church stipulated that white was a pure, untainted color, so the higher-ranked a clergy member was, the more white their attire would be. So if this woman was wearing mostly white, she must've held a very lofty position.

Of course, there were plenty of Church members who held administrative rather than combat positions. In fact, they made up the majority, with the exception of the Paladins. That made sense, since the number of ordinary devotees was far greater. However, it didn't mean the organization was lacking in military strength. Quite the opposite; it was mighty enough that any rebellions from ordinary devotees could be promptly crushed by a small number of high-ranking clergy members alone.

In short, high-ranking clergy members with combat skills were in a class of their own.

And one of them's come to this forest...

Still, I was confused. How had they tracked me down?

If I had any faith in my father, it was inconceivable that he would've divulged any information about my location. And he wasn't the only one. The entirety of House Olipiage should've obeyed his orders. After all, he was the head of one of the leading noble families which formed the backbone of the country. Forget about keeping the whole household afloat if he wasn't even competent enough to pull off this minor job. So I should've been able to trust him on this.

If they've located me in spite of that...did I slip up somewhere? But I was in one of House Olipiage's carriages during the entire journey to the Purgatory Forest. And besides, I only stumbled across the kobold settlement and took it as my new base by coincidence. I didn't plan it at all.

Under normal circumstances, it'd have been nearly impossible to find me. Certainly, if this were an ordinary forest, hunters who knew the land well could track a human by the footprints they left. But this was the Purgatory Forest. The typical hunter wouldn't set foot in here, and even if they did, human trails vanished here faster than sand eroded in the desert.

To tell the truth, I'd been periodically making scratches on trees and snapping certain branches so I wouldn't lose my way, but those marks disappeared entirely after two days. The scratches healed, and new branches as thick as my arm sprang out from where the old ones had been. I wondered how they'd evolved for that to even be possible. Even though the forest growth looked like basic trees you could find in any old place, they must have been different somehow.

Some people could tell apart tree species by the seeds they produced, and would harvest them for food. The thought made me uneasy, personally. Although they didn't seem to be poisonous, I was paranoid that the seeds might suddenly sprout and grow in my digestive tract, and then I'd get an upset stomach.

Anyway, with this forest being what it is, how'd they know that I'm here? Is this person the root of the Church's terrifying reputation?

For now...

"Cath, look after them."

“Meow?!”

Cath appeared surprised by my declaration and clawed at my arm, trying to stop me.

Nevertheless...

“She probably came here chasing after me. At least she won’t come looking for the rest of you if I go out to her. She probably thinks you’re just some random forest monsters. If she comes this way, take everyone and get out of here. I’ll...find my way back to you later. I promise.”

Cath didn’t look convinced. But she stayed quiet for a little and seemed to understand that my mind was made up. She gave a dissatisfied meow and patted me with her forepaw, urging me to go.

It’s good to have a friend.

I broke out running toward my destination, the place where huge mana blasts and the sounds of explosions were coming from.

* * *

Ahhh, it’s hopeless... That’s a freak of nature.

I hadn’t had this feeling since I’d seen that giant ishkitini outside the cave. The Purgatory Forest was said to be a den of fiends, but I’d never imagined I’d see a human who was worse than any of them.

She was firing off dense mana and holy energy in every direction, letting out loud peals of laughter as she obliterated all the plant life around her. She was like the very embodiment of purgatory.

Even so, her appearance was extraordinarily beautiful. She wore a fluttery, pure white clerical tunic and a hat which signified her high status. Her long and loose wavy hair gave her a sophisticated, metropolitan look. Contrasted with her dreamy violet eyes, it made her presence seem almost illusory.

She was a young woman, about the same age as me or perhaps a little older. But given how vicious she was, she was my complete opposite. I didn’t want to get involved with her.

I was willing to bet that she was the person who’d come from the Church. A

clergy member with that much white in her clothing and that much combat strength had to be a <Holy Maiden>.

The Church had three Holy Maidens: the Holy Maiden of Shields, Mimette; the Holy Maiden of Armor, Luna; and the Holy Maiden of Swords, Aht. It was clear to see which one this was, judging by her actions.

I'd heard all the Holy Maidens had some destructive prowess, but the only one of them with such a destructive *disposition* was the last of their number, the Holy Maiden of Swords. She was the youngest of them, a girl with a mystical air about her. But on the battlefield, her white garments would be dyed red. The other two's roles typically lay elsewhere, which made her personality all the more conspicuous.

If any of the Holy Maidens had to come after me, I wished it would've been anyone but her. The Holy Maiden of Shields was said to be subdued and gentle, and the Holy Maiden of Armor was said to be a sensible person. But the Holy Maiden of Swords was hopeless. Talking things out simply wasn't an option with her.

I cursed my luck. Thinking about it, I'd had a terrible streak. Gaining the <Holy King> skill, getting tossed in the Purgatory Forest of all places, and finding a safe haven only to discover that the cave vicinity was along an ishkitini's regular commute.

I really can't catch a break...

But it hasn't all been bad. I met Cath, and I found the kobolds. Father probably put me here because he thought I'd have the best chance of survival in this place. I may be feeling bitter about it all, but I know he had his reasons.

I'm stuck in an awful situation, but I've made the most of it. The fact is, I've survived. Normally, any human surviving a single day in this environment would have fate or fortune to thank. So I must have one of those on my side...I think. Probably. Maybe.

I'll make it work out somehow this time too. It'll all work out...

Mustering up my meager courage, I crept out of the bushes and jumped in front of *her*—the Holy Maiden of Swords, Aht Heresy.

* * *

Oh my, thought I.

The privilege I had—rather, that was *given* to me as a Holy Maiden—to trace the geographical position of a status card let me sense that my target, Noah Olipiage—no, he was simply Noah now—was in the area.

As it happened, this privilege differed slightly between each Holy Maiden. Apparently, this was the ability to access the Divine Intellect. The Church would find those who had this ability and round them up to be their Holy Maidens.

But I digress. In short, I knew Noah's general location, though I couldn't ascertain exactly where he was. The other Holy Maidens would likely have been able to narrow down his location to the Purgatory Forest, but no further. I stood out among them in this aspect. This was why it was my role to assassinate whomever necessary on the battlefield. All told, the other two didn't have the appropriate disposition or skills for it anyway.

I loved war. Some might call it unbecoming of a Holy Maiden, but I felt most alive when doing battle against a monster or even a human. I was raised by my mercenary father, and had lived roving from one battlefield to another until my talents as a Holy Maiden were discovered. My father had taught me fighting techniques, and I was happy to learn.

I had not yet reached age ten by the time I first killed someone. Regardless, my heart was filled not with grief, but with unbounded joy that I could at last stand on my own. Later, and even after I joined the Church, my feelings remained the same. Those brief instants when I could grasp my opponent's background and mentality in the midst of a mortal clash were when I felt alive. That was why I found this mission to be so wonderful.

My mission was to capture or kill the person with the root skill <Holy King>.

Why? Because such a thing could not exist. As a follower of His Holiness, I had to eliminate it.

* * *

"Please hear me out!" I shouted as I jumped out in front of the girl. It was worth a try. Once I'd woven my way through, just barely dodging her attacks,

that was. This was possible for me through the <Catfight> skill, which was practical in that it gave its user high evasive ability in addition to an attack power boost.

Even the crazy girl was taken by surprise to suddenly see a human pop out of nowhere in the Purgatory Forest. She looked at me, eyes opened wide. Her magic and holy attacks came to an abrupt stop.



Apparently she wouldn't kill me before I could say anything. That was a bit of a relief. However, this was still a precarious situation. I could be blown to bits at any moment. *If that happens, please make it swift and painless.*

In any case, I continued. "I take it that means you'll hear me out, then?"

"Hm? Y-Yes. Are you...ahem, would you perchance be..."

"'Perchance'? Oh, are you being formal because I'm from a noble family?" I didn't see anyone else around who would warrant that kind of speech.

"Don't mind that," she said. "Tell me your name."

She seemed to be either in a rush or a panic. Her eyes were blazing bright, a terrifying amount of emotion hiding within them. It was scary. They had been blank only moments ago. What kind of change had come over her? Was she ecstatic at having found her target, whom she could now kill?

That sounded entirely plausible. Although if that were true, that'd spell doom for me. Now that I was out in the open, there wasn't anything I could do about it. I'd still try to find a way to run away, though.

"My name is Noah. I used to be Noah Olipiage, but I've been exiled. I'm sure I've been removed from the family register by now. My status card clearly says just 'Noah.' Would you care to look?"

Normally, it'd be unthinkable to show the details of your status card to a stranger. But if I wanted to guarantee my family's safety, I had no choice. A status card could only be used by its proper owner, so even if I showed her my base status, she wouldn't be able to see details for Cath and the others.

It should be fine. If she demands to see the specifics for <Follower Contract>, I'll just have to refuse. And then I'll hightail it, I thought.

Having awaited my answer, the woman nodded. "As I thought. Then permit me to introduce myself as well. I am the <Holy Maiden of Swords>, Aht Heresy. One of the Church's three Holy Maidens...until just now."

"Huh?"

What is this girl talking about? I thought.

Aht continued to speak. “Coming here today has made me certain. I was called here to serve you, Master Noah. Please take me under your banner. Humble though I may be, you will find me very capable. I will be of much greater use to you here in the Purgatory Forest than the other two Holy Maidens.”

* * *

To kill him, or to capture him. I believed these two to be my sole options. There was no other way to demonstrate my loyalty to His Holiness and my faith in the gods. Therefore, I was taken by surprise. When I beheld him, I understood.

Understood what, exactly? It’s simple.

That Master Noah was the true Holy King, and that I existed for his sake. The supposed “Holy King” whom I had previously served was an outright impostor, and had only been my master temporarily. Thus, I asked Master Noah for his name and petitioned him to take me as his subordinate.

Master Noah was perplexed by this. Why would one of the Church’s Holy Maidens, who was chasing after him, wish to serve under him? Not to mention, I had been ravaging the forest just moments ago. He must have found my change of heart too drastic and wished to gauge my sincerity.

Therefore, I explained the Church’s affairs to Master Noah in great detail: why I’d come to this place, how the Church was dealing with him, the functions of status cards, and the meaning of root skills, among other things. When he heard all this, Master Noah’s angelic face flashed with surprise, yet also showed that he’d been persuaded. All his questions had been answered—in particular, the reason why he’d been granted the strange root skill called <Holy King>.

Being of service to Master Noah, even in such a slight capacity, made me...happy. It was quite surprising. I had believed that the only joys in my life lay in murder and destruction. However, on this day, I learned that I had the capacity for other, more benevolent pursuits.

Henceforth, I live for Master Noah. I shall serve at his side and die before him at his side, I thought from the bottom of my heart.

This girl is actually serious.

It didn't take me long to be convinced of that. The girl in question was the <Holy Maiden of Swords>, Aht Heresy. With no shame whatsoever, she boldly declared that destiny had led her here to meet me.

It was suspicious, no matter how you looked at it. Anyone would assume it was a grift or trap or something of the sort. It was just too good to be true. But deep within her eyes, there was a glint of powerful, almost fanatical trust in me. I'd seen eyes like these many times before. More extreme members of the Church had eyes like these, of course, but I'd also seen them among those who served House Olipiage as body doubles for my father. If they were told to die, they would do so without question. In their eyes was a devilish glint which betrayed an inhuman level of conviction.

Though my gut instinct was almost certain, I knew it would be dangerous to rely solely on that. Just because she seemed trustworthy didn't mean I should believe her without reservation. So first, I started by asking her some questions.

"Why do you want to serve me? You were devastating the forest just a minute ago. Weren't you doing that to smoke me out, then capture or kill me or something?"

I started with the basics: her objective. If she didn't give me a clear answer, she was definitely not to be trusted.

But in defiance of my expectations, Aht gave a deep nod and responded, "An excellent question. As you've presumed, I came here on orders from the Church to either apprehend or kill you, as you have the <Holy King> skill. I was causing havoc exactly because I was sure you were in the area. If I made a ruckus, I thought you would at least come to investigate. Even if you didn't, I supposed that clearing the entire area would give me better visibility."

That's an extremely unsettling answer. She doesn't seem to be lying, though.

Honestly, I wished it was all just one big lie or joke, especially the part about her coming to kill me. I hadn't even done anything wrong. Why was the Church persecuting me like this? The Holy Maidens were one of the Church's top

military forces, along with the Order of Paladins.

And they readily sent one of them to assassinate me. Is my <Holy King> skill that dangerous?

About all I could do with it was form <Follower Contracts> with other beings that I had an accord with. That said, <Follower Contract> was tremendously convenient in its own right. It let me borrow skills, so ultimately I might be able to grow considerably powerful with it. That would require training and effort, though, and hardly seemed to necessitate an instant death warrant.

As for <Flesh and Blood>... I didn't know much about it, honestly. The most I'd gathered was that consuming monster flesh and blood would noticeably increase my strength. But even then, average humans had their mana increase a tiny bit too when they ate monsters. I figured I just got a slightly bigger boost than other people.

Is that seriously enough to make me look like a future threat? But really, if that's the case, they'd be killing off everyone with a moderately useful skill. I don't think even the Church would go that far.

With this in mind, I pressed Aht for more answers. "So then what reason do you have for wanting to serve me?"

"It's quite simple. From the moment I laid eyes on you, I felt the hand of destiny. I became certain that His Holiness, whom I'd previously served, was only an interim—nay, a *false* master. I was born into the world and bestowed the powers of a Holy Maiden all so that I could serve you."

"You realized all that as soon as you saw me?"

Am I that irresistibly charismatic? I almost wondered to myself, but I could say for certain: definitely not.

Despite my current state, I *had* been born into a ducal house. I'd been schooled in statesmanship, so perhaps that had given me some degree of charisma. Those who ruled over people by birthright would be educated on how to properly present themselves for the role. It wasn't really a matter of having the knack for it or not. It just became second nature through behaving and being treated a certain way. So maybe I had that going on too. But did I

have enough of it to wildly enrapture someone I'd only met once, at first glance? There was no way that was possible.

That sort of thing did happen all the time in folklore, though, in those adventure stories where a great itinerant knight met his or her destined master and together they built a prosperous house. I couldn't entirely deny that there was truth to those stories, or at least that they were based on something that had actually happened. But in those cases, embellishments were made as the story was passed down through generations, eventually becoming what we know today.

So obviously that can't be what's going on here. But then why is she saying all this to me? I wondered, before realizing, *Ah. I've experienced the same thing a couple of times before, haven't I? Yeah, that must be what this is.*

"I thought as much." I took out my card and looked at the entry under <Follower Contract>.

Follower Contract: Demon Cat (Juvenile), Hound Sprite x10, Hound Trooper x2, Normal Folk

It was clear as day who the "Normal Folk" listed on my status card referred to. After all, there were only two of us in the Purgatory Forest right now. Well, maybe there was an adventurer wandering around somewhere, but that didn't matter if I hadn't met them. So logically, this "normal folk" had to be...

Name: Aht Heresy

Species: Normal Folk <Human>

Titles: Holy Maiden of Swords, Beloved Child of the Blade Emperor...

Root Skills: <Swordfighter 10>, <Great Swordfighter 10>, <Swordmaster 3>, <Swordprincess 5>, <Mage 7>, <Holy Maiden 6>

Derived Skills: <Slash 10>... <Cleave in Twain 3>...

<Glidedance Blade 5>... <Earth Magic 7>, <Wind Magic 6>, <Water Magic 5>, <Fire Magic 8>, <Lightning Magic 6>... <Info Lookup 6>, <Elementary Holy Arts 10>, <Intermediate Holy Arts 10>, <Advanced Holy Arts 6>...

General Skills: ... <Cooking 7>, <Laundry 8>...

“She’s a freak of nature...”

“Hm?” Aht tilted her head inquisitively at my muttering. Her beautiful face had exceedingly fine features, almost as if it were molded by hand, so even this slight action appeared charming and adorable. But if the details on my status card were to be believed, those looks were deceiving.

For starters, there was the number of root skills she had. It wasn’t particularly unusual to have multiple root skills, but most people had two at most. Those with a lot of talent might have three. That was said to be the limit for ordinary humans.

Yet she had *six*. And two of those were at level 10, the highest you could go. Getting even *one* skill that high was said to be so difficult, you’d have to devote most of your lifetime to improving it. She’d maxed out two skills.

The rest of her root skills were all rare ones too. Swordmaster was a top-ranked Swordfighter skill, as was Swordprincess. I’d never heard of any human who possessed both. “Holy Maiden” came as no surprise, since she was the <Holy Maiden of Swords>, but she was a high-level mage to boot.

There were a decent number of root skills that would naturally give you a compatibility for holy arts, but it was said that having these root skills made it harder to raise your magic levels. You’d almost never have any mage-class root skills, and even if you acquired some magic via general skills, you wouldn’t be able to raise its level very high. Despite this, Aht had superb command of all the basic elements, and she was even compatible with the element of lightning. Up to level 6, at that.

As one could tell by looking at me and Cath, level 3 was considered at least average. Level 4 was advanced, and level 5 was on the level of court mages. But all of Aht’s magic was level 5 or greater. That was more than enough to call her

a freak of nature. She could wipe out any monster in a single hit. She was *that* extraordinary.

As for the holy arts skills, I didn't know much about those. Almost everyone who had the compatibility for them was whisked into the Church, so it was rare for information about those to leak to the outside. A few things had let slip, but nobody would speak them out loud, lest the Church cast its eye on them.

Looking at her skills, they seemed to be classified as elementary, intermediate, and advanced. There was no telling whether there was anything higher than that. There was no distinction like this with regular elemental magic. If I had to say, it was more like you could tell just by looking at the levels.

The last sort was combined-type, an advanced class of skills. Even Aht didn't seem to have these—and if she had, she might as well have been a canonized saint—but that was certainly no reason to underestimate her.

As for the derived skills she'd gained from being a Swordfighter, she'd already learned basically all of the most famous ones. She had so many, the display was a wall of black. I paid special attention to the ones that caught my interest or were particularly developed. <Slash> was a basic skill that just about any Swordfighter could learn, but I'd never seen anyone who'd reached 10 with it. You could cut through boulders at 3, so 10 didn't even seem necessary. It was superfluous for common monsters, to be certain. Maybe it'd be necessary against a dragon...but I didn't even know how one would get to this level in the first place.

<Cleave in Twain> was something I'd read about in a fairy tale once. It was probably a Swordmaster skill, the sort of thing heroes would use to slay a dragon or some other prodigious monster. She had the Swordmaster skill, so it wasn't anomalous for her to have learned it, but it was certainly uncommon.

I'd never heard of <Glidedance Blade>. I assumed it was a skill derived from Swordprincess. It was less developed in comparison to her other skills, but level 5 still indicated a great deal of strength. What was more, it belonged to her Swordprincess root, which was higher-ranked than Swordfighter or Great Swordfighter. Obviously it was more powerful than either of those skills at level 10. With all this, she was powerful enough to single-handedly wipe out an

entire army.

I get it now. They weren't exaggerating about Holy Maidens being the ultimate military force along with the Order of Paladins.

The last thing I'm curious about is... <Info Lookup>? What's this? I gave it a tap.

Info Lookup: Allows the user to access the <Divine Intellect> and extract necessary information. The amount and type of extractable information depends on the skill level.

The Divine Intellect is real? I was shocked right from the first sentence.

* * *

"If I may..." came a voice from the side. I realized I'd left Aht hanging for a while.

"Ah, sorry," I apologized.

Aht shook her head. "Please, pay no mind. If you ask me to wait, I'll wait as long as you require."

She's way too meek. What about me is making her behave like this? Is it all an act? But she's recorded in <Follower Contract>. Even so, it might be risky to trust everything she says.

The contract forms on its own if I want to take someone under my protection and they want to follow me. Honestly, I don't remember wanting to protect Aht...though I was thinking it'd be great if I could negotiate with her and get her on my side. Is that all it takes? I don't know. There's still so much I don't know about the skills derived from <Holy King>. I'd better not put all my faith in her just yet. But if we can have a dialogue, that's the most civilized way to go about all this, so there's no reason for me to decline. There's a lot I want to ask the Holy Maiden.

So I spoke casually to Aht. "I wouldn't ask that much of you. Anyway, I take it

this means you don't plan to capture or kill me anymore?"

"No, nothing of the sort!" Aht puffed her cheeks, seemingly upset that I would doubt her. She looked so sweet doing it that I just wanted to point out, *You literally came here to murder me. Of course I'd suspect you.*

But if that was still her intent, she could have pulled out any one of her powerful skills and killed me instantly. The fact that she *hadn't* was enough reason to trust that she wasn't out to assassinate me anymore. I still couldn't be certain that she didn't want to capture me...but I hoped we could take things step-by-step and build some trust in each other.

"All right then. Could you tell me *why* I've got a target on my head? You said it was because I have the <Holy King> skill. According to the Church, skills are a blessing from the gods, right? It's not something I have any control over. I just got it by chance, so it doesn't seem fair to kill me over it."

"That is the Church's official explanation for skills. The truth differs."

"Huh?"

"Skills are indeed granted by the gods. However, their distribution is based on the individual's aptitude and aspirations."

"What does that mean? Did I get my skill because I wanted to become a Holy King and had what it takes?" I didn't recall wishing anything of the sort, but that was what Aht's explanation seemed to suggest.

Aht's face took on a troubled expression. "It's not quite so simple... Very well, let's take <Swordfighter> as an example."

"That's a common enough root skill."

"Indeed. It's frequently granted and comparatively well-studied. Many of those who gain <Swordfighter> may vaguely hope for the strength to fight or hold a fascination toward swords."

"Oh, I get it. It's not that they want the <Swordfighter> skill *itself* necessarily, it's that they think swords are cool or want to swing one around. So I might've wished for some fighting technique too..."

"Precisely. As it's only an ambiguous hope, you may wonder why

<Swordfighter> is so frequent when <Archer> and <Mage> are possibilities as well. The Church believes this is because an average person first thinks of <Swordfighter> when imagining a warrior.”

“Makes sense to me. So then, what prompted me to get <Holy King>? I don’t have any related hopes or desires.” Nothing really came to mind. Of course, I had a lot of different desires. But I couldn’t think of any that would be relevant to <Holy King>.

Even Aht was stumped. “I do not know enough to say. However, the Church’s stance is that, while it cannot determine whether your hopes were intentional or vague, you desired the status of Holy King and gained the skill. Therefore it holds that you are a pretender to the throne. It was further decided that both the Order of Paladins and I would be dispatched.”

Hold on. That’s a lot to process. I’m a pretender to the Holy King? They sent the Order of Paladins after me? Sure, I know the Church hates me and would probably send people to find and kill me. Maybe I’m a bit late in thinking this since I’ve already run into a Holy Maiden, but...the Church really doesn’t play around.

This is awfully excessive for routing out a lone, exiled teen, don’t you think? Just one Holy Maiden has freedom of movement, so I can sort of understand that, but the Order of Paladins can take on a whole army. That’s overkill. Well, going by her stats, Aht could wipe out an army, so I guess it’s all the same.

They’re calling me a pretender, though? The Church is acting like I’m dragging their name through the mud. No wonder they want to seize and kill me by any means possible. This isn’t something I can negotiate my way out of.

I became extremely depressed thinking of what might happen next.

Still, it wouldn’t do me any good to panic. Things couldn’t get any worse than they already were. I didn’t need to freak out right now.

I asked Aht about lots of other things and learned plenty. I was particularly surprised by her explanation of the status card’s function. Aht had known that I was in this area because of my card. To be specific, she had the skill <Info

Lookup>, which let her see the present location of someone who held a status card.

Considering this, I'd need to get rid of my status card so it wouldn't cause future problems. If I kept it, my position would be perpetually known and the Church would send an endless stream of pursuers after me. Even so, my status card was what let me know Cath and the kobolds' capabilities, and borrow their skills. Technically, I'd be able to borrow them without having to fiddle with my card all the time, provided that I had a firm understanding of their skills. But I couldn't conjure to mind all those details myself. I'd be in a jam without it.

As I agonized over what to do, Aht inquired after me. "Pardon me. Is something troubling you?"

I wasn't sure how much to tell her. I could at least say that I was debating whether to get rid of my status card. I was better off not mentioning that it let me borrow abilities. "Yeah. My location can be traced as long as I have my status card, right? I'm wondering if I should just toss it."

Aht's response was surprising. "If that's all, you have nothing to fret over. I am the only person in the Church who can do this. To be clear, the other Holy Maidens have some capability as well, but they are much less accurate. Additionally, I could use my <Info Lookup> skill to hinder them."

"What, really?"

"Yes. Would you care to try?"

"You want me to do it? How?"

"Your hand, if I may..."

She stretched the palm of her hand out to me, and I placed my own hand atop it. Obediently "shaking hands" like this made me look like I was her pet, but in actuality, Aht was the one following me. She closed her eyes and focused, in deep thought. I felt something pass through my body.

"You'll be fine now. The other Holy Maidens will no longer be able to trace your status card, Master Noah."

"That's all it took?"

“Yes.”

“That’s great. But is this enough to make the Church give up on capturing and killing me now?”

“I believe that may be too much to wish for.”

“I’d guessed as much... Oh, I know,” I realized.

“What is it?”

“Aht, I have a request for you.”

“Ask away.”

“Can you return to the Church and report to them that I’m dead? That should do the trick.”

Aht had said she’d serve me, but the Church still considered her one of its Holy Maidens. If she reported that I had died by her hand, they’d believe her with no questions asked. Besides, I was still a bit scared of her. Her behavior and willingness to obey me seemed genuine enough, but I really couldn’t imagine being able to keep someone as strong as her in check. Living in close quarters with her would be like having a dagger constantly hanging over my head.

I wanted her to leave, if at all possible. But it seemed like she was determined to stick around unless I had a foolproof reason. That’s when I had hit upon my brilliant realization.

This is a pretty good idea, isn’t it? I practically wanted to pat myself on the back.

Aht nodded at my suggestion. “That is true. If I report accordingly, they should no longer dispatch anyone to hunt you down. But, Master Noah, I hesitate to leave your side...”

As expected, she was reluctant. I had to be assertive here. “No, this is a massively important mission. My survival depends on it. If you want to serve me, then I want you to accomplish this first. I think I’ll be able to trust you once I’m confident that nobody else will be coming after me. Please.”

Aht’s expression lit up with delight just a little at the mention of my trust. She

responded with enthusiasm. “If that’s so, then I suppose I must. I’ll leave and then return. With that said...”

“What is it? I can’t leave anyone else in charge of this.”

“I have no qualms with that. Rather, I’m concerned about your daily life here in the Purgatory Forest. May I see for myself?”

It was a reasonable request. The Purgatory Forest was monster territory fraught with peril. She must have wondered whether I’d still be alive when she got back.

I’ve managed to survive up to this point, so I’m confident that I can keep going. I’ve got Cath and the others too. If I let Aht meet them, maybe she’ll be convinced and leave...

With this in mind, I said to her, “All right. You can meet my friends. But please promise me that you won’t bring any harm to them.”

Aht was still a danger, so I had to mention this. *Honestly, I’d prefer if she didn’t meet Cath and everyone else. But if she comes back later, it would happen eventually anyway. It’d be a huge issue if they ended up fighting before I even knew what was going on. So having them meet each other now should be the safer option...*

Aht nodded at my request. “I wouldn’t dream of harming your valued friends, Master Noah. Please, take me to them.”

* * *

“These are my friends.”

I introduced everyone to Aht. Her eyes opened wide and darted between my fluffy compatriots and me.

“These monsters...excuse me, these fine individuals...are your friends?” she asked with great hesitation.

“Yeah. Something wrong with that?”

I had a good reason to ask this. Aht had fought them without knowing that they were my allies. Well, actually, she’d set the forest on fire, and Cath and the kobolds had gotten caught up in it. I was in a rush, so I hadn’t pried into

whether she'd actually seen them, but judging by Aht's reaction...

"Pardon me. It's no problem at all. Setting that aside...I must admit I've done something terrible. I said that I would not harm them, but to my great shame, I already have."

"So you did meet them."

"Yes. I recall seeing kobolds and kobold soldiers in my peripheral vision while I was torching the forest. I fired off a barrage of magic at them without giving it a second thought. Are there any deceased among them? If there are, I will atone with my life."

She'd go that far? I'm beginning to think Aht is serious about serving me.

I wasn't the only one baffled by Aht's display of sincerity: so were Cath and the kobolds. When they first saw Aht, Cath had growled at her and the kobolds had cowered. Now, Cath was just eyeing her keenly. The tension in the kobolds' shoulders had eased too.

I asked the kobolds on Aht's behalf, "Are you all okay? Nobody's died of their injuries, have they?" I could see at a glance that all the kobolds who had fled from Aht were present. But since they were all injured, I couldn't be sure that there weren't any dead among them.

The kobolds shook their heads in response.

Mataza and Liber answered with "Woof! (Everyone is alive!)" and "Woof woof, woof... (However, one of our number is badly injured. They're not in critical condition, but they cannot get up yet.)"

I nodded at them and gave Aht a summarized version. "Looks like none of them have died, but one's got heavy injuries."

"Hm? Master Noah, is it possible that...you can understand monster speech?"

Oh right, I didn't tell her about that. If Aht's so surprised, it must mean that there's very few Tamer skills that can do this, if any. For now, it should be okay to tell her. If I don't, it'll be more trouble than it's worth.

So I told her outright. "Yeah, I can understand pretty much everything these two kobold soldiers—Mataza and Liber—say to me, and they understand what

I'm saying in turn. We haven't been able to verify yet whether they understand *all* human speech, though."

"Is that so? Excuse me, Lord Mataza and Lady Liber. I was told that you had someone with particularly serious injuries. May I see them?" Aht addressed the pair. I could've stopped her, but she showed no signs of aggression and was being polite. I needed her to talk to them a bit and recognize that I could survive in the forest, so I let things unfold. Besides, I wanted to determine whether the kobold soldiers would understand her words.

Mataza sought clarification from Aht. "Woof... (What do you mean to accomplish by seeing them?)"

Aht glanced my way, so I interpreted. "He's asking what you're going to do."

"I can—" Aht cut herself off. She closed her eyes and focused.

I could feel the accumulation of a force other than mana. Cath seemed to feel it too, as she narrowed her eyes. However, the kobolds didn't seem to notice. That must've been the power difference at work. I wondered what she was about to do. If she wanted to kill us all, we'd have no means of resistance. I wasn't all that resigned to death, but I didn't make any special effort to stop her, because I didn't sense any malice or murderous intent.

If she looks like she's going to strike, I want to make sure everyone else gets away.

The moment Aht was done focusing, glimmering beads of light started to float up around the kobolds. I remembered seeing this kind of thing before.

"Now I get it. This is a holy art."

Yes, this was the result of holy arts, which only select members of the Church were said to be able to use. They were most commonly used for healing. The lights surrounding the kobolds must have had this effect. The lights bobbed around and rained over the kobolds. As they seeped into them, their scratches and burn marks dissipated cleanly.

When she was certain that everyone's wounds were completely healed, Aht turned to Mataza again.

“I have the power of healing. If you permit me to see this seriously injured patient, I would like to heal them,” she professed, getting down on one knee in the Church’s gesture of utmost respect. Normally, they would only ever do this before a higher-ranked priest. But here, a Holy Maiden was making this gesture toward a monster.

Mataza likely didn’t know the deeper meaning, but he seemed to be impressed by her comportment. He faced me and asked, “Woof woof... (Milord, shall I take this human to them...?)” Apparently he had been convinced.

I nodded. “Yeah. If they can be healed, that’ll be much appreciated. I’m coming along too, though.”

* * *

“Color me impressed.”

We’d brought Aht to the badly injured kobold, and she’d healed them completely in a matter of seconds. I was once again reminded of how tremendous the Holy Maiden’s power was.

And the Church still has two more like her. I desperately needed Aht to report my death to the Church and blot my existence out of its memory. If she didn’t, my life was guaranteed to flicker out in due course. *Please have mercy on me.*

“No, this is nothing so impressive. The Holy Maiden of Shields is more accomplished in the healing arts than I.”

“More than you, eh?” What would someone more skilled than Aht be capable of? I asked her out of curiosity.

“Let me think... She could treat a company of hundreds of knights in an instant. Naturally, she would need to rest a while after such an undertaking...but to cure so many at once is beyond my range.”

“Hundreds, in an instant? Including people who are as bad off as that kobold was?”

About half the kobold’s body had been covered in burns, and its breath had been ragged. Had it been a human, it would have died. It had only survived because it was a monster. That was just how severe the injuries were. And yet

Aht had cured it with ease. If someone could do the same thing to hundreds of people at once, that was nothing short of a miracle.

“Why, yes. She would be able to completely heal all of them, including those with missing limbs. I could do that for possibly one or two people, but not such a large quantity. Given the choice, I’m far more proficient at destruction than I am at restoration. I simply cannot help it.”

I was at a loss for words. Though I knew it well already, I still shuddered to hear that she was “proficient at destruction.” Of the three Holy Maidens, this girl known as the Holy Maiden of Swords was the most suited to offense and had the most achievements on the battlefield. On the other hand, she was less suited to the more Holy Maiden-like healing arts. Though she seemed to be a jack-of-all-trades, she *did* have things she was good and bad at. Knowing this comforted me just a little.

But even though she wasn’t as good at the healing arts as the other two, she could still treat basically all wounds for one or two people. I couldn’t help but marvel at how prodigious Holy Maidens were.

“W-Well, now I know how amazing Holy Maidens are. So, what do you think?”

“Regarding what?”

“You’ve seen that I’ve got friends with me. I think I can survive here perfectly fine. You wanted to have a look for yourself, right?”

“Ah, I understand. Yes, I understand now that you have enough friends...but your battle strength is still lacking. The main residents of this area of the Purgatory Forest are comparatively weaker species of monsters, but that is not to say that there are no formidable monsters here whatsoever. You have with you a demon cat, kobolds, and kobold soldiers...about fourteen all together. There is no telling how long you may hold out.”

That stung quite a bit. We hadn’t encountered many strong monsters in this area yet. The most we could take on was an orc. It wouldn’t be an easy victory, but we could kill one if we strove hard enough. Regardless, Cath and I had seen that terrifying giant ishkitini. I didn’t know how it ranked among the rest of the monsters in this forest, but if other things like it were hanging around, we’d definitely be killed sooner or later.

I wasn't able to come up with an instant rebuttal to Aht. By the time I realized my mistake, it was too late. Greatly spurred by my silence, Aht declared, "It appears you realize that you all require strength. And I will be happy to—"

"H-Hold on. You already have a task of your own, Aht!" I desperately tried to dissuade her.

Aht acknowledged this with some disappointment. "Yes, I know. I must tell the Church of your death. However, I can stay around for a short time to train you all. The Church cannot easily ascertain your location without my cooperation, Master Noah. Therefore, we can afford some time."

"You mean..."

She'll train us? I mean, that's not entirely unwelcome, but...will that really work out? It's understandable for Cath, since demon cats can end up becoming really strong. But I can't hope for as much from the kobolds. That would leave me with the burden of getting stronger, and for that, I'll need the power of <Follower Contract>. But I don't want to show it to Aht yet.

Unaware of the headache I was facing, Aht continued.

"In the past, I belonged to a mercenary troop. I learned there that any person can be adequately trained in the span of a month. It is not hard to imagine that you've all eked out a rather difficult existence in this forest. Those who can endure such a rugged environment have the strength to live on. If you follow my instructions, I promise that I can train you all up into fine mercenaries."

True enough, I'd heard that story before. The Holy Maiden of Swords was the daughter of a certain famous mercenary troop's leader. Before she became a Holy Maiden, she had exercised her talents as a mercenary.

We aren't trying to become a mercenary troop, though. Well, I guess it's okay as long as we get stronger...right? This way, I won't need to tell her about my <Follower Contract>. I still want Aht to scram as soon as possible, but if it's only for a month, I think I can endure it.

I made eye contact with Cath. *How about it?* I indicated.

I got a response along the lines of, *Well, whatever mew say.*

I turned to Aht. “All right then. Can I trust you to train us so that every last one of us will survive?”

A beaming smile formed on Aht’s delicate, doll-like face. “Why, of course. I swear that I’ll make hearty mercenaries of you all!” she said.

Seriously, we aren’t trying to become mercenaries here...

Chapter 5: Living with Aht

I hid within the thick of the forest, holding my breath. I couldn't make a single noise. Even the sound of my clothes rustling would be fatal. My body was filled with tension.

I'm okay, right? I won't be found here?

Suddenly, screams erupted around me.

"Bleagh!" "Garr!" "Awoof!"

Oh crap! Oh crap! Oh crap! Should I run? Or should I...

As I deliberated, I heard a voice come from behind me.

"Master Noah, such a pity. You came in second. First place goes to Lady Cath, as expected."

The moment I turned around, I was knocked unconscious.

* * *

"You all gave it your best effort, but you still have much to learn," Aht said, disappointed.

Cath, the two kobold soldiers, the rest of the kobolds, and I were lined up in front of her. There were a handful of kobold pups as well, but Aht wasn't too concerned with them, or at least she didn't nitpick them.

If anyone else's posture slumped, her magic would fly right at them, along with a reprimand. "You there! Show some discipline!"

Discipline, she'd say. Was this supposed to be an order of knights? Actually, she probably had a misplaced idea that we were a mercenary troop. Either way, she was strict on the rules.

Aht had decided to train us, and we'd accepted, but there was a problem with her methods. She'd modeled the training off of her old mercenary troop, which was extremely rigorous. Just hearing the description was enough to make me

want to run away. Beginning with practicing basic movements, she would drill fighting know-how into our heads until we were combat-ready. It was both logical and efficient...except for the part where training was twenty-four hours a day.

A day only *has* twenty-four hours, so the first question that might pop into one's mind is "What about sleep?" The answer to this was not to forgo it, but that sleep would be part of training. Or so she said. I understood what she was getting at—to just treat it as seriously as everything else. At least, I'd *thought* I understood.

As time passed and evening fell, I found that Aht had meant *exactly* what she'd said. While I was sleeping quietly in the middle of the night, I had suddenly felt a searing-hot beam of pain stab into my cheek. I'd bolted upright in surprise and had seen Aht standing there.

She'd said to me, "You're far too defenseless. You must always be on guard, ready to wake up as soon as you sense something!"

I see now. That's how far she's taking this, I'd finally realized with a shudder.

Afterward, Aht made sure to wipe away the hot blood running down my cheek with her handkerchief, and healed me instantly with her healing magic. The way she neatly folded up the handkerchief and stowed it into her pocket with great care caught my eye. She had a surprisingly meticulous side to her.

The mercenary troop must have had a lot going on. Judging by the vigorous way she coached, they must've been strict about discipline. Maybe that's where she had learned it from. But I thought that it would be difficult for the kobolds if she were overly strict, so I made sure to discuss this with her.

"You can't injure the kobolds like this and expect them to understand. That's cruel to them."

But I was met with an unexpected response. Aht gave me a puzzled look and said, "Now why would you think I would do that?"

Huh? Then what was that just now? I wondered for a split second, before Aht carried on and changed the subject.

"While I'm here in your chambers, allow me to tell you that in tomorrow's

exercise, you will be hiding yourself from me. Bear in mind that you will need to silence your breathing as much as possible and make your movements slight. I'll inform the kobolds in the morning. Now then, if you'll excuse me," she said, then left. It was like a storm had passed through. I didn't feel like I'd be able to get any more sleep.

Later, the exercise began.

Ultimately, Aht found me faster than Cath, possibly due to my sleep deprivation. But even if I *had* gotten a good night's rest, Cath knew the forest better. She must've been good at concealing herself, and there was the difference in our sizes to account for as well. If she hid away for real, I probably wouldn't be able to find her either. How was it that Aht had come upon her, then? Although Cath had been found last, she was still *found*.

The reason for this was one of Aht's skills, a combination of <Mana Detection> and <Life Detection>. Apparently it was a general skill which anyone could attain with enough effort. Aht had prioritized this as one of the top skills for us to learn, so she'd assigned us specialized training for it. If we learned it, we'd at least be able to detect the positions and distances of monsters before they came close. It was an indispensable skill in the forest. Aht had learned it by the time she was five years old, so she insisted we could easily learn it starting now.

Can we really do it, though? If we don't, Aht almost definitely won't leave. So we'll just have to keep trying like our lives depend on it. In the worst-case scenario, I have a trick up my sleeve. It should all work out somehow...

* * *

As strict as Aht's training was, she did allow us some downtime. Even *she* understood we'd drop dead if we kept training without a single break. During those breaks, though, Aht had nothing to do. She was unequivocally a freak of nature unlike us, down to her physical endurance. She seemed to barely need rest. And so, during those hours, Aht would keep watch. As for what that entailed...

"GRRRAAAAAAAH!!!" A loud roar rang out. That dreadful, demonic sound which instilled primal fear vibrated in the eardrums. This earsplitting cry

naturally belonged to one of the stout monsters which were rampant in this forest. It was a high-ranking monster called a *gallytrot*—an opponent which we would be no match for at our current levels. In fact, it was fearsome enough that we would have to run away the moment we came across one.

It looked like a long-haired white dog, and was apparently a relative of kobolds, but it was several times their size. Basically, it was a dog as large as an ox. It was also extremely nimble, and its body was enveloped in strong, thick mana. I couldn't help but think that such a monster was well-suited to the Purgatory Forest.

The gallytrot could easily knock over trees with its forepaws, and its claws were tougher and sharper than a well-honed blade. It would take a great deal of battle strength to defeat one, so in ordinary circumstances I'd have run. But in this case, I was able to sit around and observe it closely. Not because we'd gotten strong enough to take on said monster, but because someone else was fighting it for us: none other than our instructor and the Holy Maiden of Swords, Aht.

True to her appellation, she was facing off against the gallytrot with a large sword—where exactly she'd been hiding it, I had no clue. Aht was a relatively petite girl, a little shorter than I was. At first glance she appeared exceedingly dainty, as if she'd never held anything heavier than a spoon. And though she was wielding a huge sword that even an adult would have difficulty swinging, she shouldn't have posed much of a threat to the gallytrot. A single swipe of its claws or snap of its fangs could render her body into a simple lump of flesh. That was how feeble she looked.

And yet, strangely enough, the gallytrot which faced her made no attempt to open its maw and howl menacingly, or close the distance between them. It was moving as if it had instinctively sensed that the being in front of it was a superior creature. The gallytrot's intuition was correct, of course. Aht's stance was entirely free of tension, and was in fact remarkably natural, showing not a smidgen of fear toward the colossal monster before her eyes. She wasn't stifling or enduring it; from her expression, it was clear she thought a mere gallytrot was nothing to fear.

"Please watch closely, everyone. You should all be capable of at least this by

the time we're done," Aht said, before swinging her large sword very lightly, as if she were dancing. For a moment, we were captivated by the beauty of her action, the way it was so incredibly unrealistic, as if it were completely weightless. This didn't last long, though. What happened in the next moment stole our attention.

"Nrhh? Agyah!" All of a sudden, a massive gash formed on the gallytrot, which wore a bewildered expression. In fact, multiple wounds had suddenly appeared all at once. A moment later, fresh blood spurted out of the gashes, and the gallytrot's giant body hit the ground. It couldn't stand up anymore; Aht's slash had dealt it a fatal blow. We hadn't actually seen the instant when Aht's slash connected, but we all knew that she was the only person here who was capable of such a feat. It was probably some technique or skill. I speculated that it was <Glidedance Blade>, which was derived from <Swordprincess>.



<Slash>, which came from <Swordfighter>, was just a power boost stacked on a regular sword slash. I'd seen that Aht had <Cleave in Twain>, which came from <Swordmaster>, but that was supposed to be a single stroke that cut the opponent in half. As far as I could tell from the gallytrot's wounds, though, that didn't fit the bill. Aht's attack seemed to have flung multiple slashes at a midrange opponent. The skill which resembled this most closely was <Glidedance Blade>.

I could be completely off the mark, though...

As I was thinking this, Aht checked to see that the gallytrot was definitely dead. She then turned back around and spoke to us.

"What you just saw was <Glidedance Blade>, a skill derived from the root skill <Swordprincess>. If one exerts enough effort, it can be acquired as a general skill as well, so you should all be able to learn this."

When we heard her, all of us present tilted our heads dubiously. *Is she serious?*

* * *

Zwsh!

An invisible blade shot out from the tip of the wooden sword. It hit a tree which was clearly out of the wooden sword's range, and made a clean cut midway up its trunk.

"Wa-woof... (D-Did you witness that, milord?!)" Mataza asked, turning to face me. His eyes shone with dubious bewilderment at what had just happened, and pride at having accomplished it with his own two paws. His big, round eyes made him as cute as a friendly puppy, but he was a full-grown adult dog. In fact, he and Liber were comparatively on the older side.

"Yeah, I saw that. That's really impressive. I don't think I can do it at all, and Cath hasn't learned it yet either. Maybe you've got a knack for this, Mataza."

I was referring to the move that I'd just seen Mataza execute. We were trying hard to learn <Glidedance Blade> under Aht's strict guidance, but none of us were anywhere close to pulling it off, even after a few days. We'd learned basic

sword movements, battled for real, and kept on practicing, so I felt like everyone had gained a decent amount of competency. There were even some normal kobolds who had started developing the <Swordplay> general skill. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't have been possible to attain skills so fast; I'd been steadily putting in effort for over a decade to learn <Swordplay> and had only reached level 3. Though they were only at level 1, this was still astoundingly fast progress.

Was it a testament to their instructor's ability? Aht was feared even among the Church as an expert at swords. This must have been the result of being taught by such a person.

But I'd had a lot of skilled experts privately teach me, as the duke's heir. The difference in talent must be a big factor. That's rather disheartening...

Well, Mataza and the rest are monsters, so that must have something to do with it, I consoled myself. Still, I didn't think anyone would be good enough to pull off <Glidedance Blade> all of a sudden...

As I pondered this, Aht explained what we'd just seen. "Lord Mataza, you certainly have a talent for the sword. However, what you just performed was merely <Glide Blade>. I suppose it was too much to ask for you to skip right to <Glidedance Blade>..."

She only muttered that last sentence to herself, but I caught it clearly. <Glide Blade> was a skill that many people with the root skill <Great Swordsman> could acquire. It had the effect of flinging a ranged slash, like Mataza had just demonstrated. I'd seen it before, and it matched up with what I knew. But what was this about "skipping" to another skill?

Out of curiosity, I asked her. "What did you mean by that?"

Aht was caught by surprise, but made no fuss about being overheard. "Oh my, I didn't know you were listening. The <Glidedance Blade> skill is derived from <Swordprincess>, and is a higher-ranked version of <Glide Blade>. Normally, one would first learn <Glide Blade> and raise it to a certain level before attempting to learn the more advanced skill."

"So...you already know the proper way to learn these skills, but you're instead trying to make us learn <Glidedance Blade> first?" I asked, irritated.

Aht looked ashamed. “Yes... I intended it as an experiment. I thought that if it were possible, your battle strength would increase dramatically.”

That made it hard to dismiss her entirely. Aht’s motives were consistent, at least. No matter what it took, she wanted us to get stronger—strong enough to survive in this forest without her. That’s all there was to it. If all this was necessary, I couldn’t argue, since I wasn’t the combat expert here.

The fact of the matter was that even if this was an experiment, Mataza *had* been able to unleash <Glide Blade>, and the other kobolds had learned <Swordplay> as well as a variety of other skills. Results like that made a little bit of trial and error seem perfectly acceptable. The very concept of “training monsters” was outside the box to begin with. Only Tamers would do this kind of thing. Considering this, I felt nothing but sheer appreciation.

Even still, I had to ask. “Wouldn’t it be faster to train us for <Glide Blade> first?”

Weren’t we using our time inefficiently this way? Well, even if this was the hard way, it wasn’t necessarily a waste of time. Still, I felt like I needed to ask.

Aht shook her head. “That is not the case. While this training method is irregular, it still accounts for <Glide Blade> being a prerequisite for <Glidedance Blade>, as the latter builds upon it. The one disadvantage to this method is how physically demanding it is.”

“O-Oh...”

So it’s tough on us, but it’s not wasting our time. That’s good to hear...or is it? Isn’t that just plain spartan? I guess I shouldn’t expect any leniency from Aht, now or in the future.

I got depressed thinking about how much longer this would go on for.

Broadly speaking, it was a pretty rough time, but it wasn’t all bad. A lot of things had gotten better since Aht came, to the point where I almost wanted to come clean and trust my fate to her. But I managed to restrain myself there.

As one could tell from Aht’s status, she had plenty of combat skills, but she

also had a lot of skills in common with regular people, like plain old chores. That honestly came as a shock to me. The skill <Cooking> was rare among noble ladies, for one. Though Aht wasn't a noble, she was still a Holy Maiden, so I'd assumed that she didn't cook for herself. But on second thought, she did come from a mercenary troop, so she must've needed to take care of herself. Being a mercenary was grievous work, and one might end up stranded in dire areas. It wouldn't do to not know how to keep yourself fed in those sorts of circumstances. Mending your own clothes was probably part of the job too.

Well, it wasn't unusual to see noble ladies who had learned <Sewing> and <Embroidery> skills as part of their domestic training. Some of them even developed their skills to the extreme, becoming highly sought-after instructors.

In any case, Aht's presence had drastically improved the quality of our meals. It's not like we had been eating poorly; I could grill things well enough, and Cath was pretty fastidious about cooking temperatures. But with Aht around, soups and stir-fry were added to our menu. She also knew how to sew, so the kobolds could now wear clothes like humans. She'd used the <Magifactory> skill to create textiles from nearby trees and monster materials. She really *could* do anything. She was altogether too convenient. I didn't want to lose her, but I was still scared of keeping her too close. As for the kobolds, she basically had them eating out of the palm of her hand.

There were other positives to her presence. For example, I'd been able to verify a lot of things. What specifically? The traits of my different unique skills. Most of it was regarding <Follower Contract>, which let me borrow skills from someone I'd contracted with. Aht was no exception, nor was the <Glidedance Blade> skill that I'd been training for. The reason why I'd chosen to take the long and hard way to learn it was because I wanted to compare the difficulty between learning it on my own and mastering it from a borrowed skill. Aht had lots of skills, including plenty that were ranked the same as <Glidedance Blade>. While it'd only be a rough estimate, I wanted to compare the difference for myself.

I'd already tried easier skills borrowed from Cath and the kobolds, but it was rare to encounter someone who had this many highly ranked skills. Even if they had been more common, my current circumstances prevented me from going

out and finding one. Just exiting the Purgatory Forest would be a challenge, particularly in terms of my social status. I wanted to get out of this place *eventually*, but I first needed to get stronger here, in a few different senses. This was one of them.

What I'd learned was that regardless of the skill's rank, it was much easier to borrow them and then train them up. I was nowhere close to learning <Glide Blade>, let alone its more advanced version <Glidedance Blade>. After Mataza learned it, Liber and Cath also succeeded, but it didn't work for me no matter how hard I tried. The other kobolds didn't have any luck either, but they all got to <Swordplay 2>, so it wasn't all in vain. I had <Swordplay 3>, so I was afraid they'd catch up to me soon if I didn't put some more effort in.

Since I wasn't able to acquire it through training, I borrowed <Glidedance Blade> and started practicing it while Aht was occupied with fighting monsters a little ways away from the settlement. For the moment, I could do whatever I wanted to, without having to worry about her catching sight of my skill.

I gripped my sword, concentrated, and swung. The skill itself guided me in how to swing my sword, infuse my mana, and muster my spirit so that I could unleash <Glidedance Blade>. I swung my sword in faithful accordance with what it told me. Then, multiple slashes shot out from the tip of my sword as if they were dancing, easily felling a tree a short distance away.

"The sheer power of this move really is incredible!"

Maybe that giant ishkitini will be a pushover now that I've got this, I thought for an instant, before shaking my head. *No, definitely not. I might be able to damage it, but there's just too big of a gap in our base abilities. It could probably close in on me and kill me before I was even ready to unleash the skill. My only chance would be to take it by surprise, but I don't have the means to do that at present...*

While I was lost in thought, I heard a cry of surprise from behind me.

"Master Noah? Was that just now...?!"

When I turned around, Aht was standing there. She had no presence, so I hadn't noticed her at all.

Am I...in trouble here?

* * *

What do I do? How am I going to get out of this one?!

I internally panicked at Aht's sudden appearance, but thanks to the education I'd received as a noble, I was able to hide it. Aht didn't show any suspicion at how I reacted. She just looked at me with a beaming smile.

What's that expression supposed to mean? I really can't tell. How much did she see? She asked me what I'd just done, so it's safe to assume she saw me use <Glidedance Blade>...

All these thoughts zipped through my mind in an instant, leaving me too agitated to say anything. Aht spoke first instead.

"I knew you could do it, Master Noah!"

This came as a surprise. *She knew? Knew what?*

Aht continued. "I'm amazed you've learned <Glidedance Blade> so quickly. On the training ground, I was beginning to doubt whether you could even master <Glide Blade>. But you were actually studying <Glidedance Blade>, its more advanced version, the whole time! Oh, it all makes sense! You intentionally pretended to be unable to accomplish it in order to raise your subordinates' morale and confidence, didn't you?! You are a paragon of compassion. I have newfound admiration for you, Master Noah. While it may be insolent to say this to the keeper of my very soul, I hope you understand when I say that my faith in you is much improved!"

Oh...oh. Every sentence scraped away at my misconceptions bit by bit. *I get it now. That must be how I look from Aht's perspective.*

That much I could comprehend. But the truth was, I'd cheated in order to use this ability. It was still just "borrowed," so I hadn't completely made it into my own yet. I'd have to use it anywhere from dozens to hundreds of times to finally change the status from (Temp) to 1. And obviously, I hadn't gotten that far yet.

Aht, on the other hand, believed I had gotten results beyond her imagination. Honestly, I was embarrassed. It wasn't my own ability at all. I wanted so badly

to depreciate myself and tell her to *lose* faith in me instead.

Well, I did accomplish it by using my own skill, so maybe I shouldn't dismiss it entirely...

I had a passing thought: wouldn't it be bad if Aht really did perceive me that way? She was graciously training us so that we could survive here without her, because she could tell what our current ability was. Misleading her could ultimately backfire on us. Practically speaking, if she overestimated my strength too much, she might judge that we were good enough when we actually weren't.

The way her face is shining right now, that seems very possible... Maybe it's time to give in, I then wondered.

While Aht did serve me through <Follower Contract>, since the skill itself was peculiar and I didn't know much about its technicalities, it had seemed risky to blindly trust her. Plus, unlike Cath and Mataza and the other local monsters, she was an eminent member of the Church that had led to my exile here in the first place. I didn't hold that against her, but the Church *was* hostile toward me, and Aht had originally sought to harm us. That was why I had to be cautious around her...or at least, that's what I'd thought.

But what about now? Objectively speaking, there didn't seem to be any reason to continue treating her with distrust. She'd gone through great pains for us, made us meals, and even sewed and mended our clothes. She was strict toward all of us, but that was for training. Otherwise, she looked out for us and was understanding. She'd given me intel on the Church too, and was willing to go back temporarily despite probably not wanting to return at all—for our sake.

Noah, look at what she's wearing now. Her clothes used to be pure white without a single blemish. Now, after killing tons of monsters and living it rough in the forest with us, they've completely lost their white color, and there's visible fraying and tears. Of course, she's been able to mend them to a degree using her sewing skills. But there would be no reason for someone in her position to go through such danger and let her appearance become disheveled. She's doing this for our sake.

When I considered this, my heart told me that it was time. *If she betrays us*

now, that's as far as I'd get anyway, right?

Thinking about it logically, I'd survived almost exclusively thanks to my <Follower Contract> skill derived from <Holy King>. If I couldn't rely on it, I was as good as dead. And this was the very same skill that tied Aht to me.

It should be okay to trust her completely—actually, that's still too scary—but as much as I do Cath and the kobolds. Whatever happens, I have to resign myself to it. Let's just do it, I thought.

Aht's flawless face stared at me with curiosity. She was probably suspicious as to why I'd gone silent, and had guessed that I was thinking about something.

She's a good person. Probably. And looking at her up close, I can see her facial features, the slight twitches of her expression, and the moistness of her eyes all the better.

Uh... This isn't good. It's dangerous for me to stare too much.

Realizing this, I forced myself to get serious again. I mustered my resolve and broached the subject.

“Aht, there's something I want to talk to you about. It's really important.”

Aht's eyes swelled with anticipation.

Chapter 6: A Confession

“I-It’s something important?! I’m ready to wholeheartedly accept whatever you have to say, so please, speak freely!” Aht’s response was bizarrely tense. Maybe I’d made the atmosphere *too* serious. I needed a lot of courage to talk about this, though, so it was unavoidable.

Well, I guess I can loosen up a bit.

“Thanks, I’m glad to hear it. So I wanted to talk about...”

“Y-Yes?”

“My...”

“Your...?”

“Skills. There’s something you should know.”

“Your...skills? Ah, oh, I-I see...”

For some reason, Aht seemed to tense up in a different way, or maybe she’d just slackened. If I were to say it more clearly, it was kind of like she was disappointed?

What’s up? Does she just not have any interest in my skills? I thought for a moment, before Aht spoke.

“I assume you’re referring to the <Holy King> skill? Truth be told, I would like to know more about its particulars. There’s no record of it whatsoever among the Church’s records.”

So apparently she *did* have an interest. *Then what was she disappointed about?* I wondered, but there were more important things to talk about first. Besides, I was curious about there not being any record of it in the Church.

“Really? I thought the Church gathered info on all kinds of skills. That’s unexpected.”

It was often repeated that the Church looked unfavorably upon unauthorized

research into skills, believing them to be gods-given. But in truth, the Church itself was extremely knowledgeable about them. It allowed its own official studies in order to better understand the gods. Anyone else who attempted study was doing so out of mere curiosity and was therefore forbidden.

For a long time, I'd been of the opinion that this reeked of sophistry. But it would have been considered heresy or blasphemy to say so in public, so I'd kept it to myself. It wasn't all that unusual for nobles to have this opinion, though. The relationship between the Church and the nobility was fraught with tension. My father must've had a similar opinion, though he'd never have spoken it out loud either.

For these reasons, the Church had to be very well-informed on skills. And yet it had no records of the <Holy King> skill? This was very unexpected. The Holy King was the title for the head of the Church, so I would have thought they'd want to learn everything they could about it...

But Aht told me, "At the very least, there's nothing written on the emergence of a <Holy King> skill in the Church's history books. It's not just rare; you are the first known case, Master Noah. That is likely why there's no available information. If even one other person had ever possessed it, I'm certain there would have been an investigation."

"Not even one? That's incredible. I figured it was rare, but I didn't realize it was *that* rare."

No wonder the Church was coming after me just for having it. I'd been certain that the skill was uncommon, but I was astonished to hear that it was the first case in history. There were lots of skills, many of which were considered rare. But all of them had historical precedent or other current holders. I'd never heard of a skill that was completely unique to one person.

"However, it may just happen to be that there are no surviving records. Humble as I am, I was formerly a Holy Maiden positioned considerably high within the Church. Therefore, I have privileges to access almost all of the Church's documents. The only exceptions would be any records in the closed archives, which only the Church's Holy King may access."

She claimed to be "formerly" a Holy Maiden, but she hadn't officially quit yet,

so technically she was still one. I could see why she'd be able to access any documents she wanted to. But if there were archives containing documents for the Holy King's eyes alone... *I get it now. That sounds plausible.*

There would have to be information about <Holy King> there. If only the Holy King himself was permitted to view them, that would explain things.

"But if that's the case, it'll be tricky to just look up the specifics in some book. I guess I'll have to figure it out myself after all."

"I believe that would be for the best. Discovering how to use a skill through firsthand trial and error is effective for any kind of skill, and more reliable than following a book."

"True enough...but there's so much already that I don't understand. That's why I wanted to discuss it with you, Aht."

"Is that so? Certainly there must be derived skills you know how to use, yes?"

"Yeah, of course. That's the first thing I wanted to tell you. It's about that <Glidedance Blade> you saw earlier."

"Yes, go on?"

"I didn't learn that myself. I just borrowed it from you."

Aht tilted her head in great confusion when she heard this.

* * *

"*Borrowed* my skill, you say? Um, what exactly do you... Ah, I suppose you mean you learned by copying me? I do recall a root skill called <Replicator>. Is it something similar?" Aht mumbled her thoughts out loud. I could tell that she knew a lot about skills and would be a reliable resource. However...

"<Replicator>? There's a root skill like that? Never heard of it."

"It's a root skill that specializes in reproducing the skills of others. You can make any skill your own as long as you can imitate it. However, as it's only a copy, the effect of the skill is downgraded. Additionally, because it's copying from *someone else*, the copied skill will disappear when the original holder passes away. While it certainly has its uses, it can easily turn the user into a jack of all trades and master of none. It's considerably rare, and I believe there are

no current living users.”

“Oh, huh. Interesting. That might make it easier to understand this.”

“By which you mean...”

“My skill’s a lot like that. But when I say that I can borrow people’s skills, it’s not just an imitation.”

I didn’t quite get the distinction between terms myself. The <Divine Intellect> just attached those terms on its own, so probably only the gods or whatever else could comprehend the exact implications. But they were a useful hint that helped in theorizing. At the very least, different terms meant there must’ve been some difference in meaning. Beyond that, I’d have to find things out through plain old trial and error.

“It’s not an imitation, you say...? May I ask for a concrete example of its effect?”

“Yeah, of course.”

We’d gotten this far. There was no reason to hide it any longer. Besides, Aht was knowledgeable about a lot of different skills, so it was likely she’d have better insights than just me pondering it on my own. I hated to admit it, but she seemed to be a faster thinker than me as well. I really was nothing but average...

I’d been born into a ducal house with loving parents and a little brother, but I was probably the most ordinary member of my family. The other three were very gifted, and I’d developed something of an inferiority complex because of it. In spite of this, my father had kept me as his successor, and my brother had said he’d support me. I was truly blessed...until I’d gotten this root skill.

But I’ve survived this long thanks to that skill, so I’m not sure whether to be grateful or resentful for it. I guess it depends on how the rest of my life goes. Now, that’s enough dwelling on the past for now.

With this in the back of my mind, I told Aht what I’d verified so far. I wasn’t sure how to bring up <Follower Contract>, so I left it for later. For the time being, the most important thing was to explain what borrowing skills entailed.

When she heard the details, Aht nodded with a surprised expression, unusual for her. “That is an exceedingly versatile skill. Of course, it does not sound as if no effort is required whatsoever, but in theory, you could learn all the skills the world has to offer. I’ve never heard of such a skill, not even once. Is there any restriction as to the lender—or should I say, the other party? The skill is so advantageous already that I doubt you can borrow from anyone for any reason.”

I hadn’t even told her the name of my skill yet or who I’d borrowed from, but she’d already arrived at the right conclusion. Aht really was sharp. Like I’d thought, I wouldn’t be able to discuss my skills without explaining <Follower Contract> to her. With no other choice, I made up my mind to tell her.

“I can only borrow from someone I’ve made a contract with.”

“A contract? Of what nature?” Aht tilted her head with a puzzled look.

This was only natural. Aht had seen me unleash <Glidedance Blade> just earlier. That was her skill, so obviously she was the one I’d borrowed it from, therefore she was bound by some kind of contract. Aht must’ve figured that much out instantly. But she had no recollection of signing up for anything. *This is most peculiar*, said her expression.

If I don’t choose my next words carefully, I might not live through this... I was scared, but I’d already steeled my resolve. I had to say it.

“The skill’s called <Follower Contract>. If I want to protect someone and they reciprocate, a contract is formed. Afterward, it lets me borrow skills from the contracted party.” I conveyed the skill’s description to her faithfully without adding anything misleading. Aht was smart enough that if I’d tried to cover anything up, she’d have figured it out right away.

Now how will she react?

“So, it’s a contract that binds you with someone who wishes to be dependent on you. And you’ve borrowed a skill from me, Master Noah. In short, would it be correct to say that you and I are bound together by a contract?”

Aht seemed to instantly understand. Well, that much could be expected. I’d explained it in plain terms, after all.

I confirmed her thoughts. “Yeah, exactly. There’s a Follower Contract between us. That’s how I can borrow your skills without prior consent... Um, sorry about doing it without telling you...”

Honestly, I was ashamed in a lot of ways, because I felt like I’d stolen Aht’s freedom in every possible sense. She was a Holy Maiden, and I’d looked into the details of her status.

Holy Maiden: A woman in whom sacred and mysterious rites dwell. (One who is destined to aid “He Who Bears a Mission.”)

The most confusing thing about this was that there was a bracketed part highlighted in a dark color. Although, when I’d tapped it, it turned lighter and became easier to read. I remembered seeing the term “Mission” somewhere else before.

That’s what it says on my status. “He Who Bears a Mission.” So...that’s what it is? Aht suddenly stopped attacking and became willing to obey me despite all the chaos she was causing, because of this <Holy Maiden> status?

Thinking back on it, it had been altogether too unnatural. She said she’d understood something the moment she saw me. That meant that from the start, she’d been compelled by this status to do so. I’d had my doubts this whole time. If so, then that meant my mere existence robbed Aht of her free will. Would she ever forgive that? For a long time now, I’d felt a kind of dread that was hard to put into words. That was why I’d apologized.

Unaware of this, Aht said to me, “No, I don’t mind in the slightest. What concerns me more is that there’s such a firm connection between Master Noah and myself! How very wonderful!”



Her joy made me feel all the more guilty. I thought that I should tell her. If she was angered by it and attacked me, then so be it. There was no helping that. It was just that hard for me to steal away her free will. It was necessary for my survival, but I didn't think we'd be able to find answers together while I felt this way.

"I'm glad to hear that, but there's something else I absolutely have to tell you. It's about your <Holy Maiden> skill, Aht."

"Yes? What is it? I'm surprised you know the specifics of my skills. Ah, could it be that..."

Oh, that's right, I remembered. "I can peruse all the skills of someone I have a <Follower Contract> with. When I borrow skills, I can select them from the status. That's how I know all the skills you have."

This meant that I could see all of her personal information whenever I wanted. Anyone else would have detested this vehemently. But Aht reacted, "Master Noah, you know everything about me?! Ahhh, you understand it all without me even needing to say it out loud... How marvelously splendid! Please feel free to behold all of me however you like!"

Argh, Aht's status is also making her act like this, isn't it...? I felt sincerely guilty. That was why I decided to tell her, no matter what kind of trouble it'd get me in.

"Yes, I've seen all of your skills. The thing that most caught my attention was the explanation for your <Holy Maiden> skill. It said 'A woman in whom sacred and mysterious rites dwell—one who is destined to aid "He Who Bears a Mission."'"

"Dear me. The part preceding the parentheses is written on my card as well, but not the following part. I'm astonished that there's such an annotation. Does my <Info Lookup> skill not suffice for this?"

"I don't know the answer for that...but is there anything that strikes you about this passage?"

"Should there be?" I had thought Aht would catch on immediately, but she tilted her head in confusion instead.

There really must be something influencing her mind, I thought. I said to her, “Can’t you read that as being forced to obey ‘He Who Bears a Mission’?”

“I suppose one could interpret it that way. However, since it specifies ‘destined to aid,’ it may not necessarily be forced, don’t you think?”

“Well, uh...” *I guess? But still...* I did kind of see Aht’s point and began to contemplate it.

Aht suddenly realized something and asked me, “Could it be that this ‘He Who Bears a Mission’ is *you*, Master Noah?”

“You guessed it,” I answered in a fading voice.

Aht’s huge eyes opened even wider, and she exclaimed, “It’s destiny!”

“Destiny?” I wanted to tell her that it couldn’t be. This was just... How could I put it? It was like unprompted brainwashing from some illusive god or higher being. Thinking of it that way, I’d done something incredibly terrible to Aht.

Sure, Aht had been out to assassinate me at first. But in the time since, she had done so much for me—and all of us, in fact. Considering this, I was willing to write off what she’d done before joining our circle. But in return for all she’d done, I’d...

As if she’d read my thoughts, Aht suddenly broke out into a wistful smile. It was an expression I’d never seen on her before. Then she took on a serious look and clasped my hand.

“Master Noah.”

“Wh-What is it?”

“There is nothing for you to worry about. If, say, my thoughts and actions are being manipulated by something, I’m happy as I am now, so that’s all that matters.”

“That’s...”

It was extremist logic. Sure, maybe it was fine if she felt okay at the moment. I could wrap my head around that. If I didn’t think too deeply about the cause and just wanted a feel-good answer. *But still, I just can’t...*

Aht kept speaking. “If you still have concerns, then...oh yes. I’d like to tell you something that came to mind during our conversation. It may ease your feelings of guilt, though you may find it disappointing instead.”

“Huh?”

“Right now, I am wholeheartedly devoted to you, Master Noah...”

This was a heck of a thing for her to just say outright, but it *did* accurately convey her current state. If she was aware of it herself, then it’d be better to hear her out for the time being.

“I know.”

“I held the same, or possibly just similar, feelings toward the Church’s Holy King until just recently.”

“Yeah, I bet. You’re one of their Holy Maidens, after all.”

“Precisely. Master Noah, do you know *how* I became a Holy Maiden?”

“I don’t know the specifics, but I heard the rumors around town. You were a mercenary in a troop, but one day, when you were going to get an award for one of your missions, you had an audience with the Holy King, and it was instantly decided that you’d become a Holy Maiden. It sounded pretty exaggerated to me, though.”

That was what I’d heard. In reality, Aht had probably only become a Holy Maiden after lots of scrupulous negotiations and formalities. These kinds of tales were made up after the fact. They were embellished anecdotes disseminated among the commoners to magnify authority. I’d thought for a while that the same applied here. All I was sure of was that there must’ve been some benefit or other motivation for her to want to become a Holy Maiden.

Instead, Aht told me, “I understand why you would think so. However, that story is generally correct.”

“Huh?”

“The Holy King knew everything I had done in the course of my mission despite not being present to witness it. He knew how I felt and was well appraised of the preceding events of my life. What was more, he told me that I

had the qualifications to become a Holy Maiden. He personally blessed me and bestowed me with the root skill <Holy Maiden>. From that day forth, I became the <Holy Maiden of Swords>.”

“That’s...” It was a lot like what had happened when she met me. To a third person, it would’ve sounded like a miracle. But to me, it sounded incredibly fishy. And at present, Aht seemed to share the same opinion. She went on.

“It does merit skepticism, doesn’t it? Ever since then, my thoughts have been clouded over by something. I was able to act rationally when executing my duties. My necessary faculties were always in good order. However, as for my personal emotions...they became faint.”

So basically, she’d been in a state similar to brainwashing? That was what it sounded like to me.

Aht continued, with a cheery expression. “Yet when I met you, Master Noah, I felt like I was liberated from it all. You may believe that an abnormal change of heart is to credit for my decision to serve you. That may be true in part. Nonetheless, if I were to say whether my previous self or current self is closer to my natural state—from when I was a mercenary—it would be my current self.”

I wasn’t sure whether that meant she was just in a better situation than before, or if she’d been restored to her original self, but maybe her will hadn’t been completely stolen from her after all. Even so, she could still be influenced somehow. We’d have to figure things out as we went along in the future.

Aht then placed a hand over her chest and spoke with a soft expression. “That is why I believe things are fine as they are now. Even if this is a destiny I have been forced into, I am not simply going along with its flow. On the contrary, if it allows me to experience such joys...then I am grateful. If this is destiny, then I hold destiny dear.”

“Aht, are you really okay with that? I could be manipulating your mind against your will.”

This was a violation of her human dignity. It wouldn’t be acceptable to treat any criminal this way. Even a wicked person had the liberty to die as themselves, even if they couldn’t choose how to go. Their souls, at the very least, were free. But I’d probably stolen her soul away too.

All the same, Aht shook her head from side to side. “I do not mind, Master Noah. My body, my mind, and the entirety of my soul all belong to you. There is nothing for you to be distressed about. However, if you do care for me, then...”

“Then...?”

“Can you place your trust in me? That is all I wish for.”

* * *

“Trust,” she said. Hearing that made me realize: Aht had known. I’d treated her as an ally, but in truth, I’d always feared her and eyed her with suspicion.

I should’ve expected it. Aht was smart and observant enough to easily notice. Maybe I’d have had more success if I were an experienced swindler, but I was basically average in that aspect. I was only getting by on luck, surviving in this forest thanks to some weird skill I’d just happened to gain. Meanwhile, Aht had brawn, brains, and pluck; she’d fought on countless battlefields as a mercenary; and she’d had plenty of honorable accomplishments as a Holy Maiden. From the very start, there had been no comparison between us. But the funny thing was that she wanted the trust of a guy like me.

Why? What gives me any right? I was full of questions. Maybe this is all the result of being forced to dance to the tune of the gods and the skills they grant.

But...

I looked into Aht’s eyes. There was, without a doubt, human emotion within them, albeit somewhat crazed. They showed extreme emotion toward me. Nonetheless, it was a natural, humanlike glint. If that hadn’t been present when Aht served the Church, then...

Then maybe my existence was of some benefit to her. Thinking of it like that, maybe I could be forgiven. Of course, if what I was doing to her could never be forgiven at all, one day something would come out of who-knows-where to mete punishment on me. But for now...I’d cling to her. And I’d take her hand, because that was what she wished for.

When I imagined relying on her, and her relying on me, it felt unexpectedly *right*.

If all I need to offer in return is my trust, then...

“All right, Aht. I trust you. From now on, I’ll stop doubting you and put my faith in you instead. Will that satisfy you?”

I didn’t know if this was the right way to respond. In the first place, it could have come off as incredibly flimsy. These were just words; they didn’t guarantee anything. We had no written contract, and there was no authority that could enforce it. It was just an exchange of open emotion between me and Aht. We were probably the only two people who knew about it. I might’ve been trying to say at the same time, *Is this really enough?*

When she heard me, Aht’s lips slowly curved up. I’d only seen her smile coldly or crazily before, but for the first time, I saw a pure smile on her face. Then, her huge eyes gradually welled up, and a single large tear streaked down.

“That alone is plenty. I will go to my death before you and stand defiantly before all of your enemies. Please watch me from behind in safety, Master Noah,” she said.

This was when Aht and I became bound together. It was most likely a contract for life.

The mood remained like that for a while, but it wasn’t unpleasant at all. The experience permeated into me like I was floating on the water’s surface, basking in the sun’s rays.

* * *

Nonetheless, Aht’s drilling didn’t ease up in the slightest. Shortly after our oath, Aht eagerly began to propose an idea to me.

“As for how we’ll proceed in the future...”

“You’re fast to change gears.”

“Why, naturally. Although I recognize you were wholly serious about your training to date, there are suddenly many more avenues for us to pursue.”

“Avenues? You mean, borrowing skills?” It was clear what she’d meant, since there didn’t seem to be anything else I was capable of.

Aht gave a deep nod. “Precisely. It would be the height of folly to not make

full use of such a versatile skill. Skills are meant to be taken advantage of.”

“So you want me to borrow a bunch of your skills and train with them. Will I even be able to catch up to you, Aht?”

That’d be basically impossible, I thought to myself even as I spoke. Aht had a slew of high-ranking skills, and what was more, they all had high levels. Even if I could borrow them, I wouldn’t be able to get up to the same level that fast. I could make them my own by training to a degree, but after that, it was all on me to hone them. I *could* re-borrow skills that I’d already made my own, and I’d found out that I could boost their strength by increasing the mana I poured into them, but that was about it. The skill wasn’t so convenient that it’d turn me into an undefeated champion overnight.

Regardless, Aht said, “Yes, I’d like for you to borrow all you can from me. But there is no need for you to raise them to the same level. Of course, I will be quite distressed if you do not surpass me eventually. But first, you must make all of my skills your own. Let us make that our priority.”

* * *

“Glidedance Blade!” I shouted the skill name as I swung the sword in the way that the skill instructed me. Keeping in mind the essentials from Aht’s teachings, I activated my mana and fighting spirit. Multiple slashes shot out of my wooden sword, ripping into a thick tree trunk a short distance away. And then...the tree fell over with a great *ka-thunk!*

It fell over from my strike. I did it! As soon as I was certain...

“Huff, huff...” I felt myself go limp. The energy sapped from my body and I fell to my knees. Aht ran to my side and helped me up. Even though she’d been living in this forest for nearly a month, there was still a nice scent coming from her.

How does she maintain her hygiene? I probably stink of sweat and smell like a wild animal at this point. Is she using some kind of skill? No, she couldn’t be... Anyway, I’m in a sorry state here.

“Aht, you don’t have to help me up. You’ll get dirty...and besides, I’m a sweaty mess,” I told her.

But Aht just smiled gently. “No, please don’t feel awkward. I’m dirty as well. We’ve been subsisting in the forest this whole time. We are in the same circumstances.”

“Sorry about this.”

Even if I tried to argue further, she probably wouldn’t listen. Ever since that day, Aht’s attitude toward me had changed considerably. She was still staunchly loyal to me, and she still acted on our behalf. But it felt like her dedication toward me personally had intensified.

The way that she just helped me up was just one example of this. It felt like we’d gotten closer. I was grateful for that, but there was something else that disturbed me. This was probably inappropriate for me to be thinking about in a survival situation, but Aht was just too beautiful. In my whole life, I’d never actually been approached with such affection by a girl around my age, especially not one this attractive.

My household had maids, some of whom were around my age. We’d had casual conversations, but they had never crossed the line between servant and master. I *could* have gotten involved with them without consequences, but even so, I was the heir to a ducal house. I assumed that I’d be judged upon my self-restraint, so I’d never done anything of the sort.

I’d also been approached by other ladies. The business of young noblewomen was to secure the most advantageous engagement they could for themselves, or to pick up intel on other families in the form of small talk for the benefit of their own household. From their perspective, I was prime pickings as the heir of House Olipiage, and was undoubtedly an excellent source of gossip material. Thus, despite my mediocrity, the noblewomen flocked to me. There were those who qualified this as “being popular,” and at parties, some young noblemen accused me of being a philanderer. But for my own protection, I thought I shouldn’t take advantage of the ladies. I just responded tactfully and made no attempt at closer company.

...I *did* have some friends, all right?

In any case, that was how I had always behaved as a duke’s son. I had no inoculation against a beautiful girl my age whatsoever. I came to realize this

keenly while I was living with Aht.

When I had observed my friends from other noble houses fall head over heels for girls, I'd thought that they were fools without a shred of self-restraint. But to actually be smiled at so cutely and so closely, and to be shown consistent favor...anyone who could resist that would be lacking in some basic human emotion, right?

I didn't understand human nature very well back then. I'm sorry, my friends. You guys were right.

I had once stoically observed from afar like a priest, and yet now I'd been captivated by Aht's charms.

Nonetheless, I'd still managed to hold myself together. I couldn't afford to become infatuated—it'd almost been a month since Aht came to the forest, which meant that she'd have to leave and head back to the Church soon. I'd decided to trust in her and had stuck to my promise, but the plan for her to return to the Church remained unchanged. It was critical that she report my death so that nobody else would chase after me. After that, Aht just had to part ways with the Church somehow. If she left after only a few days or weeks, the news of my death would come under suspicion. We estimated that a span of one or two years would be best.

In that case, we'd need to prepare ourselves so that we could get by without her during that time. Aht would be testing us on this very soon...because she'd just seen me learn the skill she'd been waiting on.

Chapter 7: Graduation and a Temporary Farewell

“Very well, everyone, it’s time for your graduation exam,” said Aht, standing in front of us in the middle of the settlement. With her index finger pointed up, she almost looked like a schoolteacher.

Come to think of it, I wonder if I’m still enrolled in school.

I was still fourteen years of age, so as one of the country’s nobles, I was educated at the academy. I’d always had a lot of private tutors, but it was necessary for me to go to the academy, if just to make connections with eminent nobles and assert my superiority to the rest of them. As it happened, I’d been exiled during a long vacation period, which was why I’d been at home. If events had unfolded while I was in the middle of the school year, I might’ve been in even worse trouble.

Oraculum’s academy was an educational institution partially independent from the state, so enrolled students couldn’t abuse their position for personal ends. Status was still recognized to some degree, but it was normal there for a child of nobility such as myself to sit and have a meal across from a commoner. One might assume this to be unpleasant, but I didn’t feel that way at all. I couldn’t say all the other nobles felt the same way—there were plenty of them who were annoyed at having to be around commoners—but I was perfectly fine with it.

My apathy toward religion probably had a lot to do with that. The authority of nobles was ultimately traced back to the authority of the gods, because the gods were said to have granted His Majesty the divine right to rule. The same went for individual nobles, who believed that they’d gotten a portion of the right to rule territories. There were a couple of wrinkles when this theory was applied to reality, but that was the public position. This was also why those with profound faith in the gods often believed themselves to be the chosen people, distinct from the rest of the riffraff. Those of us with almost no religious faith thought that this was ridiculous, but it was a belief commonly held among

Oraculum nobles—maybe not quite half, but at least a third of them. The other seventy percent were pragmatic, skeptical types like my father and I. However, the Church had such a strong influence that we didn't dare discuss it openly.

But the Church's power generally didn't extend into the academy. The academy was a neutral institution of learning. This was because nobles from other countries sometimes enrolled in it, and apparently certain unavoidable circumstances from when the academy was first established had something to do with the matter as well, but I didn't know the specifics there. Regardless, the authorities still could've entered in order to seize criminals, and the academy probably wouldn't have given me any protection. If that had happened, I'd have been immediately caught before I could ask my father for help, and it'd have been all over for me. It was a silver lining that events had happened during the long vacation. Well, that wasn't a coincidence, since the bestowing of skills was always held during that time.

Anyway, Aht talked to us about our future plans as if she were teaching school.

Almost a month had passed since Aht had arrived here. In the next few days, she would leave to go report my death to the Church. After that, she wouldn't be back for another year or two. That was why she needed to test us to see if we had the strength to survive over that period of time. It was a practical necessity.

So that meant...

"We really have to do this, huh?" I asked.

Aht responded, "Of course. This is the eastern region of the Purgatory Forest. If you continue south from here, you will reach the Urizen Federation. It's made up of multiple member nations, and many demihumans live there. The country was founded through the painstaking effort of adventurers, hence the Church has little influence over it. Thus, it has very bad relations with the Kingdom of Oraculum..."

"So word won't get out to Oraculum if we go there."

"Precisely. Additionally, the prevalence of demihumans will make it simple for the kobolds to enter, if they keep quiet. As long as they don't say anything,

they'll just be seen as small canine beastmen. And Cath already appears to be no more than a graceful cat."

We were discussing how to escape the Purgatory Forest and get to civilization at long last. But there was one problem...

"However, to get there, you will first need to defeat powerful foes."

That was the gist. Aht had already laid out a plan of sorts to get from the eastern part of the Purgatory Forest to the southern part. We had an idea of how to proceed, but there were monsters encamped in places along the route we'd have to take. We *could* just have Aht kill them for us, but she insisted that this would be a good test. If we weren't strong enough to beat them when we needed to, it would be difficult to walk around the Purgatory Forest.

I personally didn't want to come back here once we got to a village, but Aht had advised against giving up on the Purgatory Forest entirely. It could be useful as a training ground or a hidden camp. Setting up camp in the southern region was also inadvisable, as the monster population there had been thinned out and adventurers went there relatively often. Considering this, it wouldn't make for a good hiding place. We couldn't abandon our camp in the east—the settlement the kobolds had made—all that easily.

"When I refer to powerful foes, I do not mean anything akin to the ishkitini, so please give it your best effort. But in time, I expect you to become strong enough to battle stronger foes, ishkitini included."

We nodded dejectedly at Aht's merciless yet realistic statement.

* * *

"Wa-woof. (There they are, milord.)"

"So it seems..."

I found myself heaving a sigh at Mataza's report. If we hadn't spotted anything, we could've just continued happily on our way down south. But as I should've expected, things weren't going to be that easy. It was only natural. If Aht wasn't going to kill them for us, our trip south was sure to be difficult. I wouldn't have been so certain if not for the fact that there was a very high chance of encountering enemies. There was still a nonzero possibility of

avoiding enemies entirely, but knowing my luck... I was confident in my own misfortune.

I turned around to the others. “We’ll have to fight them. Is everyone prepared?”

The kobolds were crouching down at the ready, and Cath, Mataza, and Liber were beside them. They all quietly signaled their assent.

It was now or never. I steeled my nerves. Then, we sprang out from behind the trees to strike down our enemies.

“WOOOOOHH!!!”

We swooped down on them without warning, all ten of us. The other side took notice and let out growls. They had horribly low voices, almost bordering on inorganic despite having come from living creatures. But that was only natural. They were an unusual kind of monster that you’d only come across in a forest like this, or in labyrinths.

They appeared humanoid, but they gave the impression of being almost like *trees*. They looked like trees that had grown into humanlike shapes and just started walking. They came in all sizes, big and small. Legend had it that the largest of their kind were bigger than entire castles, but that sounded like a tall tale to me. With that said, the ones before us weren’t small by any means. At the very least, they were much bigger than any of us. We’d fought two-meter-tall orcs before, but these ones topped out even higher. And from their peaks, bushy clumps of leaves grew like hair.

They were a species called evil ents.

These monsters lived in forests thick with mana and were, supposedly, descendants of tree spirits who had gained the ability to move after being affected by powerful mana and emotions. There were normal, good ents which you could talk with, but evil ents had no sense of reason and attacked any living creature in sight. They had the same origins, but evil ents were said to be normal ents that had become demented. However, the good ents hardly talked about the evil ents in detail, so the truth remained unclear. Ents themselves were a rare species and were never seen in places where humans dwelled. They didn’t necessarily hate humans; they were just passive about interacting with

others.

In any case, this was why evil ents were basically monsters and there was no need to treat them as people. Although, we didn't have any leeway to treat them as such in the first place. Contrary to their looks, evil ents could move very fast. They were on par with goblins and orcs. Plus, they weighed as much as their appearances suggested, and they could use magic to some degree.

Though I had no idea whether it was true if they were descended from spirits, they certainly seemed powerful enough. They used the earth element from the four basic elements, as well as the more advanced plant magic. They wouldn't be killed easily. But they could be frequently spotted in the Purgatory Forest, so like Aht had said, we'd definitely have a hard time freely moving about the forest if we couldn't beat them.

As an aside, part of the reason why Aht had incinerated everything around her when she'd first arrived was because evil ents often hid themselves among regular trees. Locating them one by one would have taken too much time from her mission. Her method had been overkill, but it was admittedly efficient. It wasn't something the rest of us could pull off. Sure, we could start a fire, but it might spread to the rest of the forest. The Purgatory Forest was monster territory that had been around for a long time, so it had probably seen its share of wildfires, but the bigger danger was us getting suffocated by the smoke and then burning to death. We couldn't afford to shoot ourselves in the foot like that.

With all that out of the way, we swooped down on the evil ents. There were four of them, as far as I could tell. I'd checked our surroundings with an investigative skill I'd gotten from Aht, so it was safe to assume that there weren't any hidden among the trees.

"Cath, hack off their branches with wind magic! Mataza and Liber? Sorry to ask so much, but take one each! Everyone else, you can gang up on one. Just stop it from moving!"

"Meow!"

"Woof!"

I'd given them instructions in advance, but just to be sure, I shouted them out

again. Everyone acted accordingly and headed toward the evil ents.

In battle, evil ents used their branches like arms, but usually had three or four attached. That was why I'd given those specific instructions to Cath. Aht had trained her in wind magic skills as well, so she'd gone up a level and now had greater power and finer control than before. Because of that, I'd intentionally had her fall back to support so that we could fight with as few losses as possible. As I'd hoped, Cath's wind magic hit its targets, pruning off the branches.

"Woof! (Glide Blade!)"

Mataza and Liber unleashed <Glide Blade>, the skill they'd learned from Aht, at the vulnerable evil ents, ripping into them. Since the bodies of evil ents were made of the same kind of stuff as regular trees, they were known for being very durable, so they wouldn't be killed with a single blow. However, the two kobolds had been taught not to let down their guard. They went a step further, unleashing a <Slash> move at their respective opponents' weak points: their heads.



They must have pierced through the cores, because the evil ents suddenly went silent and stopped moving.

“Okay, you two go help the other kobolds!”

The kobolds were ganging up on a single evil ent, but I could see that they weren’t able to strike a finishing blow. This was good timing.

“Woof! Woof? (Understood! What about you, milord?)”

“I’ll take this one!”

In front of me was one whose bark was a different color than the others. It was about the same size, so I had thought it would be comparable to the rest. But now that I was up against it, I realized that it was remarkably stronger and probably their leader. As a testament to this, it had just been observing us so far, not making any attacks. But now that two of its kin had been felled, its movements became more violent.

This was where the battle would get serious.

* * *

“AGWAGWAGUWOOOOOH!!!” The evil ent howled something completely unintelligible and approached me. It stretched its arms—rather, its branches—forward. I couldn’t let those things touch me. They looked just like ordinary tree branches, but they could be moved just like human arms. If it got within reach, it’d seize me in its grasp. And...

“What the—?! Dammit!” As I stepped back, I felt mana swell up from the ground. Slender tendrils had coiled around my leg. This was no doubt the work of the evil ent in front of me. There was no earth magic that could do this, so it must have been plant magic.

Fortunately, it wasn’t all that strong, so when I pulled up my leg with force, the tendrils loudly snapped. Thanks to that, I managed to evade the evil ent’s branches, but having to watch out for this kind of back attack was going to be annoying. Since we were in a forest, I already had to be careful of the many roots growing underfoot while I fought. That was just to not trip over the vines that were already there—looking out for spontaneous growth that twisted

around my legs wasn't something I had to worry about. Except now it was, if that magic was anything to go by. This was going to be annoying.

I have to settle this quick...

I wasn't the only one having trouble. Mataza and the other kobolds were struggling too. They had the advantage in numbers, so they should've been fine tackling a single evil ent, but that turned out to not be the case.

We have to win this battle without losing anyone!

"Meow." Cath suddenly made her way to me, alighted onto my shoulder, and then bounced back off.

It was quick, but I understood what she wanted to tell me. *Don't panic.* I was panicking a lot right now, so I was more likely to slip up. But this cooled my head a little.

Cath's always saving me. Once we get to a town, I want to buy her something nice. Although, I'm basically broke right now. Aht said she'll give us some money for basic needs before we get to town, so I don't need to worry about that. It makes me feel like a moocher, but I'm fighting tough foes here in the Purgatory Forest in exchange, so I don't think anyone would really want to take my place...

Mundane thoughts ran through my head as I dodged the evil ent's attacks one at a time. I'd gotten calmer, and now I was starting to see that there was a pattern to the evil ent's branches. It was definitely stronger and more forceful, with more attack variations than the others, but it still wasn't capable of very complex movement. It had a lot of branches, so it had seemed like it had infinite hands, but now that I'd looked at it for longer, I saw that wasn't the case. The magic that I'd dreaded wasn't assailing me without pause either. The evil ent needed to stop and concentrate for a moment before tendrils started wriggling at my feet. As long as I monitored it closely...

"There!" I dodged the tendrils before they could coil around me. Using the momentum, I closed the distance between me and the evil ent.

"GWAH?!"

The evil ent hadn't expected that. The bark which formed its face took on a confused expression, and it attempted to draw back. But I wasn't the evil ent's

only opponent.

Shoop!

A hushed sound came from the side, slicing off two of the evil ent's branches.

"Meow!" Cath exclaimed, as if to say, "Aww yeah!" Her handy backup had arrived at just the right moment.

Having lost one of its thicker branches, the evil ent lost its balance, exacerbated by the fact that it had been in the middle of moving away from me. I wasn't about to miss such a big chance. It may have been out of reach...but I had a long-range attack. The one I'd copied and learned from Aht.

"Glidedance Blade!" I unleashed the move, shouting its name.

I didn't *need* to shout to activate it, but it was common knowledge that saying the name slightly increased accuracy and power. Supposedly the reason behind it was that doing so momentarily increased the mana and fighting spirit imbued, and there was a psychological theory that the user's motivation influenced the move's effectiveness. There wasn't hard proof of *how* it worked, but it definitely worked. That was why it was normal to shout the name of a skill when using it, given the appropriate time and circumstances.

There were instances where you might not say it if you didn't want to give away information. Conversely, you might shout it to warn allies of your attack radius and avoid friendly fire. In this case, nobody was around to hear me, and the evil ent wouldn't be able to recognize the skill name, so I was in the clear.

My <Glidedance Blade> hit the evil ent's branches and head, carving huge cuts into it. It was much stronger than the kobolds' <Glide Blade> and accomplished what that skill couldn't. My surging slashes managed to destroy the core.

* * *

"D-Did we win?"

After I struck the finishing blow and made sure that the evil ent was dead, I sank limply to the ground. Of course, this was after I'd seen from a distance that the kobolds had killed the other evil ent. I had thought they might need help,

but apparently they'd grown more than I'd expected. Even ten against one, it was extraordinary to see kobolds defeat an evil ent. The difference in power between them was just that great. But they'd endured Aht's hellish training over this past month. Compared to her, an evil ent was no big deal. As for me, I hadn't felt much fear in the middle of battle...because Aht was far scarier. My foe was nothing in comparison.

When Aht had nonchalantly said, "I'm certain you all can win," I'd thought to myself, "Easy for *you* to say." Thinking back on it, though, she'd given us a conservative appraisal.

"Well done, everyone," Aht said to us as she approached. She had been watching the battle from the rear lines. This was only natural. She had a multitude of perception skills, all at high levels, so she could still tell what was going on even at a distance. She hadn't been just observing; she'd been ready to jump into the fray if we needed to be saved. Before the battle, she'd told us, "I will not interfere, even if someone dies," but really, she hadn't intended on being that pitiless. As proof of sorts, she was closely protecting the kobold pups.

When we were at the settlement, she'd taken great care of the pups. I'd heard her say to herself many times, "I must train these pups' parents so they will not be lost." I was confident that she wouldn't abandon them. Although I was sure that if I brought it up, Aht would deny it. She was strangely bashful about these kinds of things, and purposely ignored any mentions of her gentle side. She displayed great fealty toward me, but became rather embarrassed whenever she accidentally showed sentimentality. I couldn't understand *why* she felt that way...but I could tell that Aht was a good person.

"Aht. It looks like we succeeded, somehow. There aren't any other evil ents around, right? I don't sense anything nearby..."

I asked her to be sure, since there was a chance that I was wrong. I'd gotten my skills from Aht, and naturally the levels of mine were lower than hers. This only made sense. My goal had been to learn all her skills first and wait until later to raise their levels. I'd have wanted to safely level grind with Aht around, if only it were possible, but there was something else she had to do. Not for her own sake, but for mine. I couldn't ask her to indulge me further. I had to develop the skills I'd learned on my own. I'd be a disgrace if I couldn't stand on

equal footing with her by the time she returned, so I was going to try my hardest.

“Indeed, there are none. If there were, I would address them. I am not so strict as to order you all to fight even more when you’re already so fatigued.”

“Hm, I guess not. Aht, you’re a lot nicer than you think.”

“I-Is that so? That’s excellent to hear. I had thought I would be detested for my strictness.”

“Huh? That’s what you were thinking? That’s a surprise. Everyone loves you, you know?”

“L-Loves me?!”

“Hm? Well, what I mean is...you’ve taught us all sorts of stuff we didn’t know, your cooking’s tasty, you’re beautiful... Your training was fiendishly tough, to be sure, but it wasn’t unreasonable. You gave us benchmark opportunities to see how far along we’d come. We understand what you’re doing for us. Oh yeah, and the fact that you can understand what Mataza and Liber say now is also a sign that you’ve gotten closer with everyone, right?”

“True enough, I suddenly became able to converse with them. Is that because of how close we are?”

“I think so. I still don’t know much about what <Follower Contract> is capable of, but I had sort of a hierarchical relationship with Cath and the kobolds to begin with, and we could understand each other pretty well. It’s plausible that there’s some resulting effect when fellow followers build a relationship between each other.”

That wasn’t entirely baseless conjecture. Aht and the kobold soldiers were able to understand each other now, and I’d become able to roughly communicate with normal kobolds and their pups. The kobolds’ minds felt considerably more childish than the kobold soldiers’, but that was fine. I’d no doubt gained this ability through the effect of <Follower Contract>.

My <Follower Contract> had actually gone up to level 2. That was probably part of it. The increase was likely the result of deepening my bonds with my followers.

“I am delighted to be on good terms with them, then. Considering it further, it would normally be impossible to converse with monsters as we have. It strikes me that this is a very unique experience.”

“Aren’t there a decent number of monster species capable of communication, though?”

I was referring to demihumans and demonkind. Demihumans were often treated the same as mankind, and the same went for demonkind, though this varied by country and region. For example, the Kingdom of Oraculum had a policy of human supremacy. Their definition of “mankind” was the four original species: normal folk, elves, dwarves, and beastmen. They placed normal folk at the top. I thought this was an extremely odd ideology, but it was normal there. It was the Church’s ideology, so the belief was more prevalent in the areas where they had stronger influence. Elves, dwarves, and beastmen were at times even treated like demihumans.

Of course, the Church wasn’t completely foolish. They were aware that these claims were detrimental to their own proselytizing, so they would emphasize them less in places where their ideologies hadn’t taken firm root. For example, they’d simply state that the four original species were the foundation of the world. The other species weren’t numerous or influential enough, so that was enough to keep their missionary campaigns successful. That worked for the majority of countries, but not all. Still, they wouldn’t water down their claims any further than that, since they ultimately wanted to place all other species underneath normal folk.

With that in mind, even though there were monsters capable of conversation, a Holy Maiden might have had difficulty coming to a mutual understanding with them.

Aht’s response confirmed my assumption.

“I did not carry any particular prejudice toward them, but my colleagues frequently interrupted any interactions I had with them. I could rarely talk with demihumans, let alone monsters. I did not see anything wrong with this at the time, but in retrospect, it seems strange. As a mercenary, I was active in many different countries and thus held no prejudice toward demihumans or

demonkind. It was as if...”

As if she herself had been a proponent of the Church’s discrimination. She trailed off before saying it outright, but it was clear what she meant.

It probably wasn’t her own fault. For some reason, she wasn’t her normal self before she’d formed a <Follower Contract> with me. It was hard to say that she was “normal” now, but it didn’t particularly seem to me like her basic thoughts were inhibited. Even if my skill had placed some kind of restriction on her, it probably only prevented her from inflicting harm on me or my friends. The truth was, Aht was thinking pretty freely. She’d managed to inflict a lot of strain on us under the guise of training too.

“Well, you don’t need to blame yourself for what happened back then. The Church probably had some kind of thought control on you.”

“Even so, I find it outrageous that I was fettered by such a thing. During my mercenary days, my father trained me to be able to resist brainwashing.”

“I guess that means it must have been a pretty strong spell or skill. Do you think it’s the Holy King’s power?”

“You refer to the Church’s Holy King, correct? In all honesty, I cannot say for sure. I can’t rule out the possibility that his skills are highly leveled enough so as to quash any resistance from me. However, I’ve returned to my senses through your power, Master Noah. I do not understand why he would not dispatch someone else here.”

“That’s a good point. If I were him, I’d send someone as soon as I noticed my brainwashing had worn off. Whether that be the Order of Paladins or one of the other Holy Maidens.”

“The Holy King is always swift to act in such cases. He would always dispatch troops the very moment that any rebel forces arose.”

“The Church is even more aggressive than I’d heard.”

“One must first prove one’s power in order to prove one’s ideas.”

“You’re probably right, but at the same time, that’s scary... Well, with that in mind, it’s pretty unlikely that the Holy King’s found out you’re with me.”

“I believe so. However, we do not know for certain. We must be vigilant. I will go to the Holy King and investigate the truth. Even if I am killed or brainwashed once more, please do not let it weigh upon you.”

“I can’t do that, stupid! Aht, if the Holy King does anything to you, I swear that I’ll—”

“You mustn’t! Please do not even think of recklessly avenging me or taking me back. Of course, I am glad that you would feel that way. But my wish is that you survive and achieve great things. I beg of you, Master Noah.” Aht bowed her head deeply.

I was reluctant, but I knew Aht probably wouldn’t give in to any of my protests. Without a choice in the matter, I sighed and responded. “All right. But get out of there as soon as you sense any danger. Even with a year’s buffer, I’m still worried...”

“I’m happy for your concern. As you insist, I will take great caution. I swear that I will return here alive. So please, Master Noah, make sure every last one of you survives.”

That’s a whole other struggle, I thought to myself.

“All right, that’s enough of a break. Time to start stripping bark.”

“A wise idea. Evil ents are excellent monsters made from many useful materials. I’m certain that stripping them now will be beneficial in the future,” Aht agreed.

As she said, evil ents had a lot of utility. In our case, Aht was suggesting that we bring these materials to town and sell them off. I was financially dependent on her and was planning to borrow money for basic living expenses later, but that still wouldn’t be enough for one or two whole years. Of course, we wouldn’t need money to keep living in the Purgatory Forest, but we would only use it as a hiding place in case of emergency. I didn’t want to stay in this place forever. I didn’t plan on abandoning the kobold settlement altogether, but I wanted to set up base closer to civilization. That was my intention, anyway.

As a side note, Aht had cast powerful blessing magic on the settlement so that other intelligent monsters like orcs or goblins couldn’t use it. She had a high skill

level and the effects were long-lasting, so it'd probably hold out for a full year before gradually losing effectiveness. Therefore, our goal was to find a reasonably good place to live before that deadline.

If possible, I'd have liked to live in a town...but we were a pretty large family. Most households had four or five people, but including the kobolds, we had more than ten. We'd need a pretty big house if we wanted to secure living space in town. That would be expensive, and quite difficult to achieve.

Well, we'll just have to be patient. Anyway, let's start stripping bark.

"Mana stones and bark are the main materials you can get from evil ents, right? Apparently they can be sold as lumber, but it'd be tough to bring all this along with us..."

I'd heard that once they were processed, they could fetch a high price as quality lumber. Sellers would pitch evil ent materials as classic choices for luxury noble dwellings or log houses. However, those would require a substantial amount. Depending on the scale of the project, one would easily need one or two hundred logs' worth of the class of evil ent we had just killed. Buildings made for nobles were subject to higher standards of quality and mana, making it even tougher. They didn't have to be used exclusively for houses, though. They could be sold to make walking sticks, chairs, tables, and other furniture. But realistically speaking, though we'd only felled four, we still couldn't carry all of them.

"I do have a magical pouch at my disposal, if you do not mind taking it."

"Huh? You have one of those?"

A magical pouch was an enchanted bag with an extremely enlarged interior. Its size depended on the talent of the craftsman who made it.

Those found in labyrinths were said to be the most efficient, but they were hard to find and rarely changed hands. It was mostly nobles and wealthy merchants who bought those kinds. A commoner would have no means of getting one.

Craftsmen produced magical pouches that were more accessible to commoners, but even then, it would come at a hefty price. Those were also in

low supply.

And Aht just *had* one of these.

I'd had one back at home, but sadly I hadn't been able to bring it along. There wasn't much helping that, since my father had thought that he'd be giving the Church an advantage if they learned he'd let me take one. It had occasionally crossed my mind how convenient it'd have been to have a magical pouch around.

And Aht *had* one.

Provided it had enough space, we might be able to take all the materials from the four evil ents along with us. I looked at her with expectation.

She responded, "Yes, I have it on loan from the Church. I believe the interior is about as large as a warehouse. I've stored many things in it, but it has never reached full capacity."

I was both surprised and disappointed. What surprised me was the storage space. I'd never heard of any pouches that big, not even at auctions. What disappointed me was the fact that it was loaned from the Church. I couldn't borrow something like that. I could get away with carrying things in it for the time being, but Aht was headed back to the Church soon. She couldn't report that she'd just *lost* an entire magical pouch.

I considered having her accompany us all the way to town, but gave up on the thought. Aht was extremely famous. If she went into town with us, I'd draw many looks of suspicion. Instead, we'd go our separate ways once we reached the forest's exit. She'd return to the Church, and the rest of us would head for town.

"I'd like to get my hands on a magical pouch like that one day...but it won't be that simple. Oh well. For now, I'll be satisfied with the mana stones and as much good bark as we can take."

"A wise decision."

* * *

"The spread of trees is beginning to thin out. It would appear that it is time

for me to depart,” Aht said sadly.

Our parting had come so swiftly. It hurt my heart to see her saddened face. Though this wasn't goodbye forever, we *had* spent basically an entire month together. It would be lonely without her. Cath and the kobolds seemed to feel the same way.

“Meow...” Cath yowled. She jumped up and snuggled against Aht's shoulder in a rare appeal for attention.

“Woof...”

“Woof woof.”

The kobolds likewise gathered around Aht with sad expressions. Mataza and Liber expressed their farewells.

“Woof... (Milady Aht, we shall miss you...)”

“Woof! (Let us meet again someday, Lady Aht!)”



“I’m grateful to you all. I was once your enemy and inflicted grave harm upon you... Under normal circumstances, it would have been inconceivable for us to become so close.”

“That’s all settled now. Besides, you might’ve hurt some of them, but you healed them back to full health.”

Of course, it’d be a different matter if the victims themselves hadn’t forgiven her. But the kobold which had gotten the worst injuries had become quite attached to Aht, and was now clasping its paws with a sorrowful expression. That wasn’t the look of someone seeking retribution.

“I am glad to hear you say so. Regardless, I shall not forget my mistakes. To that end, I will return to the Church and accomplish my tasks, so that I may be of service to you all.”

“You’ll be putting your life on the line. I’m starting to doubt whether you really should go back...”

“This matter is settled as well.”

“Maybe so. In any case, be careful out there.” That was all I could manage to say.

But Aht smiled. “That alone gives me the strength to persevere. Master Noah, please take care of yourself. Become stronger for when we next meet—strong enough that you can hold your own against any enemy from the Church.”

“I can’t promise you *that* much. Still, I’ll do my best to get strong enough to survive in the Purgatory Forest.”

“That should be sufficient. All of you, please strive to improve yourselves as well.” Aht addressed this last part to Cath and the kobolds. Then, before it got any harder to say goodbye, she said a few casual words. “Now then, I must be off.”

And with that, she quickly vanished.

I didn’t even have a chance to say anything. Maybe she’d thought that would be too much to bear. In any case, the way that her movement was completely undetectable made me once again stunned by her power.

I have to catch up to that in a year's time.

Just the thought stressed me out. I'd borrowed all of Aht's skills and made them my own. So if I kept practicing them, I'd definitely become as strong as her in due time. But there was no telling how *much* training I'd need. After all, Aht had gained her strength by living most of her life on battlefields. I'd have to do the same. And for that, I absolutely needed the Purgatory Forest as a training ground, since this forest was drastically more dangerous than anywhere else.

"Well, I'll just have to do my best. All right then, I can't sense Aht's presence at all anymore. It's safe to say she's pretty far off by now. Let's get going too. We'll be out of the forest soon," I said to Cath and the kobolds. They nodded and started walking.

* * *

In the Duke of Olipiage's office...

"It can't be. There must be some mistake."

Duke Seto Olipiage uttered as he read the letter. Opposite him were his wife Lin and second son Zeld. They wore the same expression as Seto—one of shock and grief.

"Dear, is it true?"

"This is just what the Church says. It's impossible for them to have found his location. Even if they had, they wouldn't be able to narrow down his exact whereabouts."

"But the Church..."

"Yes, they claim that the Apostate...that Noah has died. The Holy Maiden of Swords was sent to track him down, and she took his life. They 'regret to inform the Duke of this matter'? How dare they... They act as if my son's life was nothing!"

"Nevertheless...how is Noah?"

"He's alive. Or at least, he should be. I didn't tell him, but among the luggage he was given is a magic tool that traces his life signs. He was told that it was

merely a short sword. It won't activate unless it's within range, so I have one of our people living in a town near the Purgatory Forest to keep an eye on it. According to them, it hasn't stopped working yet. It's been imbued with a technique that will protect his life in dire need. I've done everything within my power to protect him."

Seto had anticipated situations that even Noah hadn't. He'd had a special item custom-made by extremely talented craftsmen so that the magical tool couldn't be traced even through unconventional methods. It was a risk he was willing to take.

The fact that not even Aht had noticed it was a testament to its concealment ability. Though Noah's rough treatment of it, its worn-out appearance, and the tool's lack of malice toward Noah certainly helped. Aht had mostly gained her senses of perception in situations where she had to detect hostility and murderous intent. A tool that wasn't meant to cause harm and didn't draw attention to itself wasn't liable to be noticed.

"Father, is my brother truly alive?" Noah's younger brother Zeld asked with apprehension. At age twelve, he was two years Noah's junior and hardly resembled him. He had inherited his mother's gorgeous looks and had glistening hair that was both long and smooth. He was more refined than Noah, and had more of a noble air. His brother was uncouth and beast-like in comparison.

"He must be! But as far as this notice from the Church is concerned, he's dead beyond a doubt. They must be confident about that, seeing as they sent a Holy Maiden after him. But then...what has happened to Noah? We can't be certain. We'll need to investigate this further..."

"Then Father, please let me—"

"Zeld, if you slink around the Purgatory Forest at this juncture, you'll surely raise suspicion. We cannot give them any inkling. The same goes for you, Lin," he warned. But by that logic, Seto himself could not go either. "As such, there's only one person we can send..."

Seto outlined his proposal, and Lin and Zeld both concurred.

Side Story: Liber's Determination

The first thing you must know is that kobolds are exceedingly weak among monsters. We are apparently one of the easiest species to kill, alongside goblins and slimes. I only say “apparently” because I had not known of this fact when I was living inconspicuously with my kin in the forest. I was not the only one; none of my fellow kobolds knew. Our world was limited to the settlement and the surrounding forest. Everything beyond that was an unknown, frightening frontier.

Humans called this place the Purgatory Forest and feared to even step foot in it. But to us kobolds, it was both home and birthplace. We desperately clung to life, knowing that one day we would be killed and eaten by other, more powerful monsters in the area. Since we were some of the weakest beings in the forest, there was little we could do to ensure our survival.

The most we could do was pack together with many of our kin and create a place where we could ride out the rain and wind so as to conserve our strength. As soon as we sensed the presence of a strong monster, we would flee at once and inform our comrades. We all cooperated to gather sustenance and then shared it among ourselves. That was the meager extent. But even so, the results were effective enough that our kobold pack had somehow managed to survive in this forest full of fiends. Only somehow.

There were few of us—only about fourteen in number, including pups, at any given time. I had worried that one day all traces of our existence would be gone. But at the time, I was unable to express these emotions in precise terms. After all, I had been a normal kobold. Simple communication with my kin was the most I was capable of. I was unable to speak in human language.

Things became different. That single encounter changed me.

It was an unusual meeting. As we lived our lives of hardship, one day, a person with a powerful presence suddenly attacked us. We fought against him.

Yes, *him*. Our present leader, Master Noah.

Now, the very concept of fighting against Master Noah seems absurd. But at the time, we were desperate. In the Purgatory Forest, defeat meant instant death. We were shocked that an enemy had come so close without us realizing, but we nonetheless retaliated for our survival. I hardly need say that we ultimately lost. Master Noah and Lady Cath's power was too much for us mere kobolds to oppose.

This is the end for us, I thought, once I realized that the entire pack had been defeated. That was the law of the forest, the outcome of survival of the fittest. But contrary to my expectations, Master Noah didn't kill us.

Thinking about it, it was strange. We'd been taken by surprise and had all been summarily beaten, and yet not a single one of us had lost our lives in the attack. The small pups were the most likely to die first in these situations, and they too had all survived. Why? The answer for this came directly from the person who had attacked us.

He told us, "Cath and I are going to live here!"

At the time, I was a normal kobold and couldn't speak, but I understood. Which is to say, I didn't know human language at all, but for some reason, Master Noah's words rang with meaning. I only learned after the fact that this was Master Noah's ability. According to him, we were already his followers by this point. This much was natural, as we had lost to him. We all instinctively thought that we had to obey whomever we lost to. Master Noah said that he was attempting to gain our trust. As a result, his skill activated and turned us into his followers.

This was a supreme stroke of fortune for our entire kobold clan. Not only had we gained a mighty protector, we ourselves underwent great changes. Firstly, Master Noah gave me a name: Liber. Secondly, I and another kobold named Mataza evolved, becoming larger and stronger than the rest of the pack. Though humans called them "kobold soldiers" or "hound troopers," the name we kobolds gave this species was "hound champions." These were powerful beings seldom born among kobolds, which few had ever met firsthand. They were guardians of the clan.

I had always wished for our pack to give rise to a hound champion. I had

thought that their presence would allow us to eke out a better living in this harsh forest environment. However, I'd never even imagined that I would become one. When we learned of this change, both I and Mataza were deeply grateful to Master Noah. I wanted to express my feelings through eternal loyalty to him.

Subsequent events only continued to astonish. There was never a dull moment around Master Noah. He brought with him industrious days which were nothing like our previous stagnant lifestyle. He taught us many different things so as to train us up—even though I had initially expected that he would treat us like slaves, I didn't despise the thought of that, since he'd spared our lives in spite of our loss and had prompted our evolution. In fact, I thought it would only be right for him to do so. But instead, Master Noah simply treated us as his allies, or a family he would live alongside.

When he said this to us, a melancholy expression drifted across his face. Nonetheless, since he so kindly thought of us this way, we decided to do everything we could to rise to his expectations. In hindsight, considering Master Noah's origins, he would naturally hold complex feelings toward the word "family." Regardless, we thought it an honor that he sought to create a new family with us.

Let us return to the main topic. We kobolds possessed some skills which had been passed down from our forefathers. We had managed to create a settlement, albeit a plain one, in the Purgatory Forest thanks to the knowledge and techniques we had inherited.

But what Master Noah taught us was far beyond what we'd previously been aware of, in many different categories: the ecology of the monsters which inhabited the forest, practical uses for "skills," construction know-how to increase the durability of our crude houses, and methods of trapping and fishing that made hunting easier.

Each of these made a vast difference in our lives. But Master Noah would simply apologize with a troubled look and say, "Sorry I can only teach mediocre stuff. If we were in a town, I could buy a book and teach you guys something way better, but that's tricky right now. I wonder if there's anything I can do about it."

Master Noah had already granted us such wonderful living circumstances, and yet his ideals were even more vast. I keenly felt this at that moment. I genuinely wanted to be a foundation for his ideals, if at all possible.

Then, after we'd been living this way for some time, something terrifying happened.

It occurred when I was out hunting and patrolling the forest with Lady Cath, Mataza, and a few others of our group. All of a sudden, there was a bright light, and part of the forest exploded. We were flung away, and many of us suffered grave wounds. Mataza and I made it out with relatively light injuries, but the other normal kobolds had taken much greater damage.

We're in trouble, I thought. A moment later, power accumulated within the forest once again. *At this rate...*

Fear took over me. But I recalled that Mataza and I were hound champions. We stood in front of our wounded companions as a shield, desperate to protect them somehow. But Cath stepped out even farther in front of us and yowled.

“Meow!!!”

We perceived an invisible mana barrier that had formed there. The immense light and its shock waves were blocked off by the barrier, and we understood that we'd just been saved.

After that, Lady Cath cast a glance at Mataza and me. She saw our wounded companions and meowed. We could tell what she meant. She wanted us to take our kin and flee this place. But...

“What about you, Lady Cath?” I asked her in the kobold tongue. Lady Cath simply nodded, then faced forward again, on her guard. She intended to remain there and endure for as long as she could.

Mataza and I both wavered. Should we stay and fight alongside Lady Cath? But there were our kindred to take care of as well. We thought it was best to take them back to the settlement for now. And so we did. Lady Cath's stare, wishing us to head back, was what made up our minds. Mataza and I both deeply regretted not being able to do anything for her. However, that regret turned into a desire for strength, so perhaps it was ultimately a blessing.

This always happened to us. We couldn't fight to protect what was important to us at the most critical moments. Even when we *could* fight, we would always be trounced. Thus, fleeing was always the first option that came to mind. While it was not inherently a bad thing to do so, only ever choosing to run meant that one day we would be killed for certain.

Master Noah and Lady Cath are protecting us. But if we don't fight alongside them, how can we call ourselves his followers? This thought became a driving force for us kobolds.

In the end, the person who had unleashed the light and shock waves, Lady Aht, became a subordinate of Master Noah after some twists. In this way, fortune had once again favored us. Even so, we could not count on this to continue. We had to become able to ensure our survival through our own efforts. This event made me deeply convinced.

Perhaps we were lucky, then, that our new ally could provide us with what we needed to do this. Though Lady Aht had inflicted injury upon our comrades, she hadn't done so intentionally, from what we learned of her circumstances. In addition, once she'd joined us, Lady Aht showed great kindness not only to Master Noah and his partner Lady Cath, but to us kobolds as well.

When she learned we only had crude clothing, she said to us: "Something this rudimentary must catch on tree branches and leave you prone to scratches, yes? Please allow me to help. As I recall, there are several different species of arachnid monsters in this forest. Hunting a few should provide me with sufficient thread. I will go hunt for monsters with a warm pelt as well." She then stood up and began to leave. From what she'd said, she was heading off to secure materials for our sake. However, I felt ashamed at leaving all this to her alone.

I asked her, "Woof woof? (Please, would you let me come along?)"

Unlike with my kin and Master Noah, it was difficult to communicate with Lady Aht. But surprisingly, it seemed to get across clearly this time.

Lady Aht made a mildly startled expression. "It will not be safe. Are you certain?"

Though I was a hound champion now, I was still afraid. Even so, it did not sit

well with me to leave her to handle everything on her own, considering all that she'd already done. Besides, I had heard from Master Noah that Lady Aht would eventually leave the pack temporarily. When that happened, someone would need to pick up the slack.

So I replied to her, "Woof! (I will do my best to defend myself!)"

At this time, Lady Aht's training had already begun. We stayed constantly vigilant each day. Nonetheless, I'd sensed that I was still much less powerful than Master Noah and Lady Cath, let alone Lady Aht. That made it all the more imperative for me to attempt this undertaking.

Lady Aht seemed to understand my feelings and agreed to take me along on her hunt. Both Master Noah and the other kobolds appeared very relieved when she informed them. Lady Aht had imposed a strict, all-day training schedule based on something called mercenary troop methods, upon not just myself, but all the kobolds, as well as Master Noah and Lady Cath. They would have a brief respite while Lady Aht was away. Lady Aht had wanted them to be responsible and train on their own in the meanwhile, but she was told that this was too difficult to expect so early and would be especially tough on the kobolds, so it was called off.

"Let us be on our way, Miss Liber."

"Woof! (Yes!)"

We set off together deep into the forest.

* * *

I say "deep," but the Purgatory Forest was as large as a whole country on its own. Thus, we were only headed a little beyond our settlement. Besides, it was possible that there were monsters in the deepest parts that even Lady Aht could not deal with.

"I believe I would reign victorious if I gave it my full effort, but it would be inadvisable for me to burn down the entire Purgatory Forest. With that in mind, it would be best to avoid encountering such monsters in the first place," she'd said.

I at first doubted that any single being could burn down this whole vast forest

all on their own. But when I saw Lady Aht fight the next monster we came across, I was more than convinced that she had not been exaggerating one bit.

The first prey we encountered was a bearlike monster called a red grizzly. A faint smile formed on Lady Aht's lips when she spotted it. Meanwhile, every inch of my fur was standing on end from the immense power I sensed. When I asked Master Noah later, he told me that just one red grizzly could ravage an entire village or town. A single strike from its paws could easily crush boulders, and its roar could make weak monsters fall unconscious or even deal fatal damage.

Even in the face of something so terrifying, Lady Aht spoke without an ounce of fear.

"Now then, Miss Liber, I'll begin. This will be dangerous, so you mustn't move."

"W-Woof... (But I should go with you...)" I protested.

"Miss Liber, I understand that you desire to become stronger. You wish to serve at Master Noah's side, correct?"

"Woof... (Yes...)"

"Then that is all the more reason for you to be patient when the occasion calls for it. Though kobolds are a vulnerable species, you have braved this wild, hostile environment and survived thus far. Therefore, I'm certain that there is one lesson you have learned."

"Woof? (What's that?)"

"Nothing could be simpler: when you die, it's all over. If you live, that is a victory. I too learned this in my mercenary troop. Death renders all things vain. Therefore, you must avoid it at all costs. Strength is only one element necessary for pursuing that goal."

"W-Woof! (But then, I won't be able to protect what I need to!)"

"That is not true, and the proof lies in the fact that both you and your pack are still alive. So please, continue to do your best to survive. Both I and Master Noah will give you our full support."

I was at a loss for words.

“At present,” Lady Aht continued, “you are no match for a red grizzly. However, if you observe my battle with it, you will learn its movements and be able to ruminate on how you would confront one. This is a significant advantage when fighting enemies. Strength comes in many forms, Miss Liber. I want you to learn forms beyond raw physical prowess.”

After saying this, Lady Aht ran over to the red grizzly to begin the battle in earnest.

Her words left a lasting impression on me. Pursuing just physical or magical power is not enough. If you rely only on those, you will lose somewhere along the line. That is why you must always think of your means of survival. That is what is most important, she taught me.

However, if I were to be honest, this logic seemed to no longer apply to Lady Aht herself. After all, she was powerful enough to face even a red grizzly. The way she had talked made me think that Lady Aht would rely on her nimbleness to fight, but instead, she stepped out boldly in front of the red grizzly, grabbed onto its hanging forepaws, and started to grapple with it.

Lady Aht was clearly the smaller and more delicate of the two, and it was hard to think that she could even begin to compete in strength. But the red grizzly was actually forced back. It wasn't going easy on her either; it must have been using all of its might, but the red grizzly was shaking, while Lady Aht seemed completely unaffected.

“Haaah!” Lady Aht gave a simple rousing cry.

The red grizzly's huge body flew up into the air and flipped over. Before it had a chance to recover, Lady Aht wrapped her arm around its neck and put it in a choke hold. Moments later, the red grizzly foamed at the mouth and lost consciousness. Once she was certain it was downed, Lady Aht cut off its head.

“That's the first one. Let us do three more today. That will be plenty for me to make winter clothing for everyone. Other than that, I believe there should be an arachnid—a silver spider—nearby, so let us have it discharge some thread before killing it. That will do well as clothing material.”

After saying this, Lady Aht drained the blood from the dead red grizzly with her water magic. According to her, its blood was a very useful material as well, so she filled a few bottles with it. Combat ability wasn't her only talent; she had a broad span of knowledge as well. *I have to study her technique closely while she's still around*, I thought to myself.

A few hours later, as we continued to walk around the forest, she achieved the quota she'd set for herself. She'd defeated several Red Grizzlies, and she'd also found a silver spider and obtained thread material from it.

As its name suggested, the silver spider was an arachnid monster. It was a terrible fiend twice the size of a kobold. Its basic ecology was the same as a normal spider, but instead of snaring tiny bugs in its web, it preyed on the monsters that traversed the Purgatory Forest. This meant that its threads were tough enough to prevent monsters that regularly fought for their survival from escaping. Lady Aht additionally told me that the thread could be used as a weapon. If I wasn't careful and got caught in it, it could easily lop my head off.

I wondered how the thread could be harvested as a material. The answer to this turned out to be an interesting method: capture a goblin wandering nearby and toss it into the silver spider's web. When the silver spider discovered the goblin, it bit into its nape. The silk spider's thread was not its only weapon—it also had potent paralyzing venom. The bitten goblin became as stiff as stone, after which the silver spider shot out thread and wrapped the goblin in a cocoon while it was still alive. Once it was completely wrapped, the silver spider deftly placed the goblin on its back and carried it to a gigantic spider web woven between the trees. On it were several objects just like the freshly made cocoon. This must have been how the silver spider stored and preserved its food.

Upon seeing that there were only five cocoons, Lady Aht gave me a task. “So few of them will be insufficient to make clothes for everyone. Let us capture ten or so more goblins to present to it. Miss Liber, you can handle mere goblins, yes?”

At present, I could kill normal goblins with ease. However, Lady Aht's task required that I capture the goblins *alive*. I would have to only knock them out. The reason for this was that silver spiders only wrapped up living creatures in

cocoons, as prey that was already dead would only last for a few days. The cocoons were just for storing food, and it would be detrimental for the food to spoil before it could be eaten. With that said, even the living prey would die of starvation within a few days of their capture. I assumed that after ten days or so, they would begin to rot anyway.

However, this was where the silver spider's paralyzing venom proved its worth. In addition to immobilizing, the venom also made its prey comatose. They were almost petrified, and thus would not spoil even in the heat and humidity of summer. Supposedly they could last for over an entire year in this state. This was not possible with dead prey. It needed to be alive.

Incidentally, when I asked Lady Aht how she knew all this, she said that the Church had conducted experiments. They had harvested silver spider venom, injected it into living beings, and observed the resulting changes. The Church found the venom particularly expedient, and it was in constant demand. I was too afraid to ask *what* they used it for, though...

After she told me all this, I captured goblins alive as ordered and successfully had the silver spider wrap them into cocoons. When we returned to the settlement with a trove of materials, I was swelling with pride. Though it was not my own achievement, Lady Aht praised my support in front of everyone. Afterward, the finished clothes were given first to Master Noah, next to Lady Cath, and then to myself.

I was so happy. From the bottom of my heart, I wished these days would go on forever.

But Lady Aht had a mission to perform. A very important mission to report Master Noah's death to the Church. On the day we parted with her, every kobold grieved and hugged her. Lady Aht in turn grieved, called each one of us by name, and was reluctant to go. I recall Master Noah wore a saddened look on his face as well.

But this won't be farewell forever. Lady Aht will return to our pack one day. We need to become strong enough to fight alongside her when that time comes. In fact, I'll make certain of it, I thought to myself, as I waved goodbye to Lady Aht.

Extra Chapter: The Final Trial of the Purgatory Forest

“Looks like we’ve got one last trial to go through,” I murmured.

The exit to the Purgatory Forest was within sight. We’d parted with Aht less than an hour ago, and now we just had to get out of the trees...or so I’d thought, but things wouldn’t be so easy. Right in front of the exit, there was a gang of about ten goblins and orcs lying in wait, as if they were intentionally blocking our way out.

“Woof! (We can’t proceed unless we kill them!)” Mataza said with a battle-ready smile. No longer were the kobolds the fainthearted monsters at the bottom of the forest’s hierarchy. Aht’s training had given them not only basic strength, but confidence as well.

“Grrrr... (We can vanquish these ones by ourselves.)” Liber’s confidence was also promising.

I was still hesitant to go along with this suggestion. But when I glanced at Cath on my shoulder, she bopped my head with her paw and meowed. By this, she meant “How about you let them handle it?”

I pondered for a moment. As far as I could see, there were only goblins and orcs. Neither species was very strong, but they were holding weapons, meaning they were higher-ranked. The way they carried themselves was intimidating as well, so I couldn’t automatically assume they were weak. In fact, I could feel a decent amount of mana from them too. However...

“No, I should have faith and let them try.”

This was the conclusion I reached. I *could* fight them myself, but against these minor enemies, the kobolds wouldn’t have much chance to help out. I’d gained *that* much power getting trained by Aht. Even still, Aht had beaten it into me that there would always be someone stronger out there, but I could at least tell at a glance whether I would win against an enemy or not. And I could tell that these would make good practice opponents for the kobolds.

So I gave them my orders. “All right, guys! This time, Cath and I won’t help you! Try to defeat them all on your own! But victory isn’t enough! Every last one of you needs to come back alive too!”

The kobolds gave a rallying cry and moved out.

Mataza and Liber were at the vanguard, of course. With that said, they weren’t charging in recklessly. It was plain to see that they were following what Aht had taught them.

“Bworgh?!”

Mataza swung his spear at the most powerful-seeming orc among the bunch of ten monsters. The orc was pretty large, and the size difference between them was like a child and an adult. But Mataza demonstrated his skill by how he easily deflected the orc’s giant sword with his spear. After a few exchanges, the orc dropped its sword. Mataza didn’t miss his opportunity. He leaped up with his spear held sideways and cut off its head.

Meanwhile, Liber had gone after a goblin with a staff. In terms of raw mana capacity, this one was stronger. My suspicions that it was a mage were confirmed as Liber approached it. After reciting a short incantation, the goblin fired huge chunks of ice. However, Liber knocked all of them down with her sword. This wouldn’t have been necessary if they were fighting one-on-one, but there were friendly kobolds fighting other orcs and goblins behind Liber. She’d done this to make sure stray chunks didn’t hit them. This wouldn’t have been possible if she didn’t have a good grasp of her surroundings and energy to spare.

The goblin understood this as well. Sensing the gap between their abilities, it attempted to retreat. But Liber didn’t permit this. She quickly closed the distance between them and swung her sword. The goblin wouldn’t let itself be killed so easily, and made an earthen shield with magic. However, it wasn’t tough enough to repel Liber’s attack. Her slash pierced through and left a large gash in the goblin’s stomach. This made the goblin lose its concentration completely. Using magic usually required intense focus, but now that the goblin’s focus was broken, its fate was inevitable. Liber’s sword stabbed straight through the disoriented goblin’s chest and took its life.

The orc and goblin that Mataza and Liber had respectively killed were powerful monsters, and had apparently been the leaders of the gang. After they died, the group suddenly lost cohesion. Some of them panicked and tried to escape, but the other kobolds surrounded them and took them down one at a time. Within a few minutes, the gang of monsters lay annihilated in front of the kobolds.

“Your teamwork was perfect. Great job, everyone!”

When I congratulated them, all the kobolds wagged their tails and barked. Apparently they were expressing joy.

They're monsters, but when they do this, they just seem like normal dogs. It's honestly pretty cute. But if they can battle like this without needing me to give them specific instructions, we should be able to get by in town just fine.

Afterword

Thank you to everyone reading this book and to everyone who bought it. It's great to meet you—and to those who I've already met, it's great to see you again. I'm the author, Yu Okano.

I've been fortunate enough to publish a good number of books so far, but every time I have to write an afterword, I find myself on guard. I just don't know what to write about. I could talk about myself, but I don't lead a very interesting life, so I can't think of much to discuss. But when I'm writing stories, I feel like I'm going on an adventure. It's thrilling. It's set in a fictional world, a fictional continent, or a fictional country...and yet there's an actual, living protagonist who meets people, makes friends or enemies, and journeys around the world in a frenzy.

One might think that the adventure's all just artificial anyway, crafted according to the author's intended plotlines and manipulations. But surprisingly, this isn't quite the case. Authors hailing from all times and places have commented that their characters "take on a life of their own." I dislike this phrase and have always thought that it just isn't realistic. But lately, I've started to understand it a little.

Of course, characters don't act through their own free will, but as I make them walk and talk in the story, I gradually get an idea of what actions the character would prefer or the kinds of things they would absolutely not say. When there's a choice to make in the story, wild ideas like "this character definitely wouldn't lean this way" or "this character would probably say this" keep popping into my head. *That's* when it almost seems like the characters "take on a life of their own." I think that's what it means. When I'm in this state, story developments quickly come to mind and it's more fun to write. I feel like my fictional characters and worlds are brought into existence at these moments.

I hope that Noah's group and their adventures will take root in the minds of

everyone reading this book as well.

May we meet again in the next volume. Thank you, and see you then.



I had fun drawing
so much! Thank you!!
TAPI-CA

I wanna roast meat
around a campfire.

Bonus Short Story

Noah's Memories of a Warm Family

Of the general skills that I'd learned without borrowing, the ones that were most advantageous in the Purgatory Forest were Swordplay, Wind Magic, and Fire Magic. Swordplay let me fight, obviously. Wind magic could be used offensively, but I could also hide myself with it by masking my scent from sharp-nosed monsters. Fire magic was most useful for starting campfires. I could use it offensively too, but I was somewhat afraid of things catching fire in the middle of the forest. I'd feel guilty about causing a wildfire, even if it were here in the Purgatory Forest.

"I really burned myself the first time I used fire magic..." On a quiet night inside the cave, I recalled a memory from back when I was at the House of Olipiage.

* * *

"Noah, I am about to teach you magic. There are multiple types, but the one said to be easiest to learn is fire magic." My father Seto told me this when I was small.

I had private tutors, but it was a custom among nobles to have one's first magic spell be taught by a family member. My mother could have taught me, but my father loved me dearly and had been adamant that he'd be the one to do it. Besides, my father was an able mage who could use all four basic elements, which was rare even among nobles. It went without saying that he would be the most appropriate instructor for me.

Besides, I respected my father both then and now, and was proud to learn from him. He was excellent at casting spells, and the fire magic he displayed then was stunning. We were in the house's vast magic practice grounds, so it didn't cause any damage, but *that* certainly could've set a forest ablaze. My father had probably been eager to show off to me.

Trying to imitate my father's magic, I let mana course through my body and chanted the spell I'd been taught, again and again. But my father's magic had had too strong of an impact. My internal vision of fire magic was skewed, and my magic ended up misfiring. I couldn't control the flames, and it kept going until I was drained of magic.

Well, I was a child back then. I'd hardly had any mana capacity, so it wasn't a big deal. Even so, my father had been distraught.

"N-Noah?! Are you all right?! Are you hurt?! ...You've been burned! Hold on, I'll bring you to a healer right away!" It was wholly out of character for him. He frantically picked me up and set off running.

My mana was almost completely exhausted and I was only half conscious, but I remember my father's expression well. I remember how my childlike mind thought, *Ahhh, I'm lucky to have a good dad.*

Afterward, my father brought me to the house's healer on staff, and my burn was treated. It wasn't very big, so I healed straightaway. But it was funny how for a while afterward, my father became overprotective of me.

As for my education in fire magic, my mother had taught me something more practical at a later point—how to make just a small spark. She complained when she heard of my father's method.

"Magic is guided by the imagination. Envisioning what you want is critical. Of course you'd misfire trying to do an extraordinary spell right from the start," she groaned.

My father hung his head, with no trace of his ducal dignity. "I'm sorry. I wanted to show off to him."

"I understand where you're coming from, but please put safety first next time."

"Of course."

"Good... Ah, Noah. It's about time to invoke it, don't you think?" My mother had been monitoring the stirrings of my mana and advised me that I was plenty ready.

I nodded and focused on the spell to create a small flame. “Spirits of fire, answer my prayer and bestow a spark here. <Petit Fire>,” I chanted, and a tiny flame lit up in my palm.

* * *

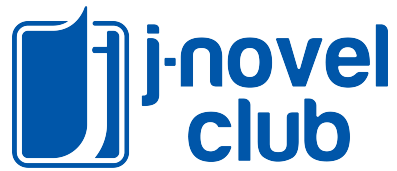
“Those were happy times,” I murmured. I reflected on the past while sitting in front of the campfire in the cave. A cold breeze chilled me.

“Meow.” Cath jumped up on my lap and licked my cheek. It seemed she was trying to comfort me.

“You’re right. I’ve got you now...and I’m not entirely unhappy either. Besides, deep down, I know he didn’t exile me because he hates me. I just have to cheer up and do what I can.”

“Meow.”

I didn’t know yet how much I could do on my own in this forest. But I could always try my hardest to survive. And if I ended up dying anyway, I could do so with a smile on my face. I still had the magic that my father had taught me. They hadn’t stolen that away. The campfire flame flickering in front of me felt symbolic of that day happening, and of my family’s kindness.



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The Exiled Noble Rises as the Holy King: Befriending Fluffy Beasts and a Holy Maiden with My Ultimate Cheat Skill! Volume 1

by Yu Okano

Translated by Alex Honton Edited by Austin Conrad

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